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TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

VOL. 1557.

A STAR AND A HEART; AN UTTER IMPOSSIBILITY

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT.

IN ONE VOLUME.

TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

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A
STAR AND A HEART

TO WHICH IS ADDED

AN UTTER IMPOSSIBILITY.

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT.

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1876.

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STAR AND HEART



ANOTHER POSSIBILITY

FLORENCE MARYAT

COMMITTEE EDITOR

PRINTED

BERNARD TAUCHNITZ

1876

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A STAR AND A HEART.

A STAR AND A HEART.

A STAR AND A HEART.

"Hearts are more than coronets,
And simple worth than Norman blood."

TENNYSON

CHAPTER I.

A Ruffled Star.

THE dull and dirty manufacturing town of Leadstone seems transfigured, and by but one idea. In the public-house windows, on the hoardings, filling every available space, in fact, appears a coloured lithograph of a woman's head—a woman with classical features and large blue eyes, and a mass of golden hair like a flame of glory streaming behind her. In the stationers' and musicsellers' shops may be seen softened likenesses of the same person; and huge posters in black and scarlet letters, announcing the advent of the great London actress, Miss Stella Beauchamp, at the Theatre Royal, Leadstone, meet the eye at every turn. But neither the artistic photographs nor the flaming posters attract the Leadstone public like the coloured lithographs. There are a hundred of them disposed about the town, if there is one; and yet each

separate representation of the great Miss Beauchamp's charms seems to engage its own separate little crowd of worshippers. For the people of Leadstone, although their town appears to be chiefly composed of iron-mongers' shops, and all their days are passed in handling and moulding and selling that unattractive metal, still preserve an immense reverence and love for art; and their theatre is one of the best regulated and best appreciated in the provinces. Perhaps the very fact of the dull and uninteresting work by which they make their living causes them to be all the more ready to devote their nights to pleasure. Anyway, they not only like the drama, but largely patronize it, so that the Theatre Royal, Leadstone, is never empty; and when—as on the present occasion—a London star comes down to fulfil a fortnight's engagement in their city, pit, gallery, and boxes are filled to overflowing. But the coloured lithographs displayed so lavishly upon their walls are a novelty, and the comments passed upon them are amusing.

“Fancy having her picture put up like that!” says one.

“Ain't she rumly drest? Looks as though that flare-away thing 'ud tumble off in another minute.”

“Do you believe that hair's reale, Jim?” cries a female voice. “Don't you be such a fool! It's all false—every bit on it. Who ever see such a colour?”

“Well, if she's only half as good-looking in reality as she is in that there picter, I shall go and look at

her every night for one, and think it cheap at the price too——”

“Cheap at the price!” interposes another woman, shrilly; “and wheer’s the money to come from, you idiot? I should like to know that!”

“Well, ’tain’t your money, so what odds is it to you?”

“I can’t tell about the colouring, of coorse, till I’ve seed ’er,” remarks an old man, “but the feeturs is exactly similar to the photographs.”

“Oh, them London photographers can do anything they like with the feeturs.”

“Well, we shall see ’er to-night, and judge for ourselves. *I* goes for one.”

“And I!” “And I,” repeat the bystanders.

“We’ll give ’er a reg’lar bumper, and no mistake. Beg your pardon, sir,” continues the speaker, as he steps heavily back upon a foot behind him.

“All right,” replies a cheery voice. And the little crowd fall somewhat back, as they recognise a member of the theatrical company.

He is a young man of perhaps five or six and twenty, dressed in a suit of rough tweed of unmistakable country cut, and wearing a straw hat on his head, and a flaming crimson handkerchief knotted round his throat. His hair is dark and rather long; his features are good, and his eyes and smile peculiarly pleasant; but his figure, though well built and muscular,

is *gauche*, and he carries about him a thoroughly provincial air. He walks up to the hoarding, and looks at the lithograph for a few moments in silence. Then he says carelessly to the next man to him:—

“Is it like her?”

“I don’t know, sir. I haven’t seen ’er yet. *You* ought to know better than us, sir.”

“I haven’t seen her either. It’s a pretty picture.”

“Very pretty, sir. I expect it’s a flattery thought.”

“I daresay it is,” replies the young man, with a light laugh as he turns away.

“Who’s that?” says one of the crowd, when he is out of hearing.

“Why, don’t you know? Mr. Hamory, as sings in the *hoperettas*.”

“Nonsense! Why, he as played the Prince in the burlesque at Christmas, and wore a pink satin dress?”

“Of course.”

“Bless me! I never should have known him. I *am* disappointed,” says one of the ladies.

“Ah, they looks very different by daylight. This Miss Bo-champs—or whatever she calls ’erself—she’d seem like two women if you could see her morning and night, I bet. But Mr. Hamory’s very haffable, for all that. Well, I must be off to my work, or there’ll be no theatre for me to-night. Come on, Jim.”

And little by little the Leadstone mob disperses.

* * * * *

Meanwhile the object of their comments, Stella Beauchamp, who, having spent six months in visiting almost every theatre in the United Kingdom, has agreed to play at the Theatre Royal, Leadstone, for the last fortnight of her provincial tour, is sitting in the large dull room of the best inn the town affords, very tired, very bored, and, if the truth must be told, somewhat out of temper. It is her first visit to Leadstone, and she has come there on the representation of the wife of the manager of the theatre, who is an old acquaintance of hers. But the place has disappointed her. She has just come back from her first rehearsal, and the members of the stock company were not up in their parts, the scenery was not all forthcoming, and Miss Beauchamp was not so openly and universally worshipped as she expected to be; hence Miss Beauchamp's access of ill-humour. For if this young woman has one prevailing weakness, it is the love of admiration. The incense of flattery is as the breath of life to her; she has been used to it so long, she cannot live without it; and everything was in such confusion at the theatre this morning, that no one had any time to do more than attend to his own business.

"I wish I had never consented to come to this stupid hole," she says to her friend and companion, Miss Reed, an elderly lady who travels about with her, and plays the duenna when necessary. "I never

should have done so, had it not been for Emma's representations of the merits of the stock company, and the immense reception I should receive; and then to go there this morning and find nothing ready—not even the first scene set! And that man who has to sing the boating-song for De Courcy—where was he, I should like to know? I never was so put out in my life.”

“My dear, it will be all right in the evening, depend upon it,” says Miss Reed, soothingly; “they were inconvenienced to-day by the absence of a scene-shifter, and you put yourself in such a rage, you frightened the company. But Mrs. Halsted assured me they are all perfect.”

“What should she know about it? She hasn't been on the stage since her marriage. By the way, how fat she's grown! I never should have known her. And why was not the tenor there? It quite put me out, missing the boat-song, particularly as I have dumb-play with that fool of a girl they've put on as Rosalie all the time. Nice kind of hash she'll make of it to-night.”

“The gentleman—Mr. Amory I think they call him—had an engagement this morning, Mrs. Halsted told me, at an oratorio rehearsal in the next town. But the song is simple enough.”

“I don't care whether it's simple or not simple; he ought to have been there to sing it. I wonder what

on earth he takes me for! Some country bumpkin like himself, I suppose. I shall remember this against Mr. Amory when I see him."

"My dear Stella, as if all the world did not know who you are!"

"I don't believe this horrid place is in the world. I never saw such dull, dirty, grimy streets in my life. How Emma can live here I can't imagine. And not a decent-looking man in the theatre. I declare, if I hadn't De Courcy with me, I'd go on to town to-morrow."

"No, you wouldn't, my dear. You'd never break an engagement honourably made for the sake of a little spleen. You're over-tired, Stella, from yesterday's journey. Go and lie down till dinner-time, and you'll be quite fresh for your triumph this evening."

"Triumph! As if a set of clods like these would be likely to appreciate the higher walks of the drama. When I poison myself to-night, they'll most likely think I've tumbled down by accident, and burst out into a laugh. Does De Courcy dine with us?"

"I think not. He said nothing about it. You know his uncle lives a few miles from here, and I believe he is going to stay with him during his engagement."

Down comes Miss Stella Beauchamp's foot upon the floor.

"How *odious* of De Courcy! It's just like his horrid

selfishness, when he knows I shall be as dull as ditch-water all the while I am here."

"But, my dear, it was only yesterday you declared he had grown so old and stupid and skinny, that you couldn't endure the man to come near you."

"No more I can—off the stage. Still, yesterday, you know, we were at Liverpool; and to-day—we are at Leadstone."

"And Lord Henry Mecklington managed to have business at Liverpool at the same time as yourself, and he has none at Leadstone," remarks Miss Reed, demurely.

"Quite true, Reedy; I don't wish to deny it. I spent the most delightful week at Liverpool that I've experienced since I began my tour. Everything was so bright and jolly and charming. What lovely flowers Lord Henry used to bring me! But here—bah! I don't suppose a soul will ever think of giving me anything."

"Perhaps they will present you with some 'pigs of iron,' as they are called, Stella, to take back to London with you in your dress-box."

"Fanny, if you aggravate me in this manner, you'll make me throw something at your head. I'm in anything but a sweet temper to-day, and that I can tell you."

"There is no need, my dear; the fact is patent. But be reasonable, Stella. You cannot judge of what

kind of reception you will get here till after to-night. Mrs. Halsted expects it will be most enthusiastic."

"I hope it may be. I shall most certainly go back to town if it is not. But I can't get over the impertinence of that man—Emery or Amory, or whatever you call him—daring to absent himself from the rehearsal."

"How you do harp on the shortcomings of that unfortunate man! One would think he had committed a brutal crime."

"It shows great want of respect to me, to say the least of it. Just think how that fellow Barry, who sang the part in Dublin, used to wait for my coming; he was always there before the time."

"Poor Barry was smitten with you, Stella. He would have waited an hour any day to see you for a moment."

"Well, I suppose this creature has seen my photograph."

"Oh, it comes out now, does it? You are offended with the poor wretch for his want of taste or discrimination—for his unpardonable lack of curiosity in not rushing to see if you are as handsome as your portraits make you out to be, *not* for his defalcation respecting the song."

Stella Beauchamp rising, rests one of her pretty feet upon the fender, and regards herself compla-

cently in the mirror over the mantelpiece, before she answers—

“And if I am, it is nothing out of the way. But I suppose these country-folks have not much more brains than their pumpkins. What o’clock is it, Fanny?”

“Half-past two.”

“Heavens! no more than that? How am I to get through the time till dinner? Are all my things unpacked?”

“Yes, and laid out for this evening. You crushed that green satin terribly at Liverpool; I think I must pass an iron over it before you can wear it again.”

“Pooh! *for Leadstone!*” with the most contemptuous accent. “I should as soon dream of ordering a new dress at once. What do you suppose the iron-mongers will care if the satin be creased or not? Anything will be good enough for them.”

“I think you will find yourself mistaken, my dear; however, have your own way. But you will take my advice so far as to lie down till dinner-time, wont you?”

“Oh, yes; I have no objection to that,” with a yawn. “There’s nothing else to do that I can see. Ugh! that grimy window! everything here is twice as black as it is in London: the atmosphere is perfectly mud-coloured. And some people live in Leadstone all the year round! It is incredible. Of all the manu-

facturing towns that I have ever seen, this is the very worst."

And grumbling as she goes, the spoilt child of Fortune (for Stella Beauchamp's reputation is no bubble, but a good solid structure, built upon hard work, whatever little airs she may occasionally indulge in) walks into her bedroom, and sleeps soundly till she is called to dinner. By that time she has considerably recovered herself. Her art is dearer to her after all than her own vanity; and in the prospect of a new success her energy rises and dispels all smaller humours that, engendered by fatigue, have hung about her like a noxious vapour. As she drives to the theatre with Miss Reed she looks beautiful. Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes are sparkling; she is just in the vein to go on and poison herself with the completest success.

Mrs. Halsted, who conducts her to her dressing-room, is profuse in her congratulations.

"My dear Stella, you are perfectly lovely; you will take them all by storm. And we have such a house, my dear! crammed from pit to gallery. Just hark at the noise they're making; they'll hardly let them play the farce through."

"Is the man here?" demands Miss Beauchamp, hurriedly, as she commences to dress for her part.

"What man, my dear?"

"The tenor—to sing the boat-song, you know."

"Mr. Amory? Oh, to be sure. Shall I introduce him to you?"

"Lord bless me! no. What on earth should I have to say to him? Only mind he's up to time, that's all."

"Oh, he's sure to be that; the most punctual, quiet young man we have in the company, my dear. And such a lovely voice; you'll be quite charmed with it."

"I don't care a fig about his voice; only tell him to be sure and give me a wait between the verses for my play, or I'll kill him. The petticoat, Fanny."

"Ah, the farce is over!" exclaims Mrs. Halsted, as the sound of clapping makes itself heard from in front. "Now I'll go and find Amory, and give him your message. Don't hurry yourself, my dear; we always give them a good twenty minutes between the pieces."

"*Don't hurry yourself!*" repeats Miss Beauchamp, contemptuously. "Poor woman! she is thinking of the time when we used to go on in tights together in the burlesque, and stand in a long row doing nothing. As if I should be likely to hurry myself for anybody now! It would be my first experiment in that line—wouldn't it, Fanny?"

"Now don't put yourself out about it, Stella. Mrs. Halsted meant it for nothing but good-nature, you may rest assured. But you really must make haste, if you don't intend to keep them waiting."

“Or to keep myself out of my own bed, you mean. *That* is a matter worth considering, I own. Well, you may finish my toilet, then. The sooner it’s over, the sooner to sleep.”

And when the curtain is drawn up for the melodrama that night, Miss Beauchamp is actually ready to step upon the stage.

She meets with an ovation she little expected. Dull as the Leadstone manufacturers may be in daily life, they know good acting when they see it, and both her talent and her beauty are exceptional. The play is interrupted at every turn by the loud acclamations of the audience; and after each act Miss Beauchamp and Mr. de Courcy are called before the curtain, to receive the renewed applause of their admirers. To the head of Stella, who lives upon flattery, the incense mounts as an intoxicating liquor. All her apathy and ill-humour disappear; she plays better in each succeeding situation, until the climax of the drama is reached, and she poisons herself at the very moment that her lover’s boat is approaching to rescue her, and she hears his signal-song beneath the window.

Mr. de Courcy plays the lover, of course; but since he has not been gifted, amongst his other qualifications, with a tenor voice, the song has invariably to be sung for him by some one behind the scenes. Miss Beauchamp, who has quite sufficient to do to poison

herself effectually, has not been used to think much of the song so long as it is correctly given, and a proper time allowed her for the groans, gasps, and last dying ejaculations inseparable from her trying position. But to-night, just as she has tossed the fatal liquid down her throat, a strange voice falls on her ear—a voice so rich, so round and mellow, so thrillingly sad and sweet, that, unmusical as she confesses herself to be, she cannot choose but listen. The boating-song sounds as it never sounded to her before. For a moment she almost forgets that she is dying; then by an effort returns to the business in hand, and finishes herself off as expeditiously as possible, just as the last love-notes die away; and De Courcy leaps with agility over the shaky window-sill, looking as though he had been singing vigorously all the while, to find his lady-love stretched dead upon the floor.

The curtain comes down amidst thunders of applause, the principal actors are called on again and again, and then there is a cry for “Amory!” And the young tenor, still dressed in his suit of tweed, very red in the face and very unwilling about the legs, is shoved on by the acting-manager to make his bow like the rest.

“O my dear, what a wonderful success!” cries Mrs. Halsted, as soon as Miss Beauchamp emerges from her dressing-room; “and such perfect acting! You

positively brought the house down. And you too, Mr. de Courcy! This is a treat for Leadstone. We shall make a fortune with you both. Oh, dear! oh, dear! I haven't seen a piece go better since I married Mr. Halsted."

"I am so glad you're pleased," says Miss Beauchamp, who has been clapped into the most beaming of tempers; "that play always does go well, and your tenor is positively charming. I really should like to thank him for his song."

"I will fetch him to you in a minute. He will be so honoured by your notice. A beautiful voice, hasn't he? A pupil of Mr. Halsted's brother. We think a great deal of him in Leadstone. Here, Mr. Amory, step this way, will you, for a moment? Miss Beauchamp wishes to be introduced to you."

The young singer advances bashfully, and stands before the London constellation blushing, but dumb.

"I am glad to meet you," she commences, sweetly. "I want to thank you for your delightful singing. It was perfect, quite enchanting!"

"You are very good," stammers Mr. Amory, looking as though he wished the earth would open and swallow him.

"Did you never see the song until to-day?"

"Never, madam."

"You must have a marvellous capacity for learn-

ing. I wish I could pick up my business half as quickly."

"La, my dear, what nonsense!" interposes Mrs. Halsted; "I'm sure no one could find any fault with what *you* did to-night. Could they, Amory?"

"No, indeed," he replies, in the same hesitating manner; "Miss Beauchamp's acting is—is——"

"Is *what*?" demands Miss Beauchamp, laughing.

"Like yourself, madam—perfection."

"Come, that's not so bad for a country compliment, Mr. Amory. I think you must have had a little practice before. And is this the first time you have seen me?"

"Quite the first."

"Are you sure?"

"I—I could hardly have forgotten, madam."

"What, not in London?"

"I have never been in London."

"*Never been in London?* Bless my heart, what a remarkable thing! But you are never going to bury that voice of yours in the country? 'Twould be a positive sin."

The young man blushes scarlet with pleasure.

"I—I certainly *hope* some day to see the metropolis. And if anything *could* take me there, it would be——"

"What, Mr. de Courcy, is it good-night? Not going to have supper with us, then?"

"I cannot, Miss Beauchamp, thank you. Not to-night, at any rate. I promised my uncle to return directly the play was over."

"Oh, go along with you then, you faithless creature. We shall see no more of you now, I suppose, that you have got amongst your grand relatives. Be off to your uncle's supper, and I hope it will disagree with you!"

"You wicked woman! I return good for evil, and hope that yours may be both pleasant and profitable. Good-night."

"Will Mr. Amory try to make it so for us?" says Stella, with her most insinuating smile. She has already found out that the provincial tenor, notwithstanding his rough exterior, is good-looking and sympathetic.

"I—I beg your pardon," he says, not comprehending her remark.

"Will you come to the hotel and sup with us? I suppose we have something for supper, Fanny, have we not?"

"I conclude so. But perhaps Mr. Amory is tired." Miss Reed is evidently not predisposed in favour of taking the tenor home to supper.

"La, my dear, and *you* must be tired after your journey here and all," interrupts Mrs. Halsted. "You had much better go straight home to bed, and see Mr. Amory some other day."

"I never go straight to bed," exclaims Miss Beauchamp, who is not fond of interference; "and I hate sitting down to meals alone. Wont you come home with me, Mr. Amory?"

"I shall be delighted, only too delighted; but my clothes——"

"Oh, never mind your clothes. You wont see anybody but me and Reedy. Here, Fan, where's my cloak and the handbag? I left them in the dressing-room."

"Let me fetch them," cries Amory, flying on the wings of excitement to oblige his new-found goddess.

"So kind of you to notice him after that fashion," whispers Mrs. Halsted gratefully. "He's a great favourite with us all, is Amory; but a most retiring young man. You'll find him very bashful, I'm afraid."

"*N'importe.* I like bashful young men, they're so uncommon. Now, Fanny, what are you goggling your eyes out of your head for? Am I my own mistress, or am I not? Oh, here is my cloak. Thank you, Mr. Amory, a thousand times. And now will you see if the carriage is waiting for us? Good-night, Emma; I shall see you to-morrow, no doubt."

And preceded by Miss Reed, followed by Mrs. Halsted, attended by young Amory, and mobbed by the understrappers of the theatre and a collection of dirty men and women hanging about the stage-door, the great Miss Beauchamp is at last put into her carriage and safely conveyed back to her hotel.

CHAPTER II.

Meteoric Flashes.

"AND now," says the actress gaily, as they reach a large room, on the centre table of which preparations are laid for a meal, "just give me time to lay aside my cloak, Mr. Amory, and we will ring the bell for supper. I hope you are hungry; *I* am." And with a radiant smile, she disappears behind the door that separates the sitting from the bedroom, followed by the long-suffering and laden Reed. Mr. Amory, left alone, does not feel quite comfortable. It has all happened so quickly and unexpectedly that he has had no time to think of it before; but why has this beautiful and exalted stranger placed him in so awkward a predicament as to bring him without preparation into a brilliantly-lighted apartment, and invite him to sit down to table with her? His hands are unwashed, his hair unsmoothed; his morning suit of tweed feels out of time and place; he is just in the same rough condition in which he sauntered to the theatre to sing that song behind the scenes, never supposing for a moment that the great Miss Beauchamp would ever notice him or it.

Well, here he is, and he must make the best of it; but he feels miserable and out of his element, and would give a great deal to be able to rush downstairs

and make a bolt out of the hotel before she returns. Meanwhile the ladies discourse together.

"What's the meaning of it?" demands Miss Reed, curtly, as the chamber-door is closed behind them, and she shakes out Stella's gold-embroidered mantle.

"The meaning of *what*?"

"You know—of bringing this unfortunate young man home to supper?"

"*Unfortunate!* Some people would think he was just the other thing. The meaning is—I choose it."

"To make a fool of him."

"Don't be rude and call names. Am I never to have an acquaintance? De Courcy couldn't come, so it was only natural I should ask Mr. Amory."

"A country bumpkin whom you have seen for the first time to-night."

"He sings divinely."

"What do you care about music?"

"A great deal more than you think for. I mean to have some lessons from him during my stay." Miss Reed shrugs her shoulders and answers nothing. "And perhaps he may be very amusing. Who knows? You never can tell what a man is made of till you try. He may prove a pleasant companion for us whilst we are in Leadstone."

"*Après?*"

"Nothing, I suppose, or whatever may happen. What nonsense you are talking, Fanny! I wish you'd

put my things away, and hold your tongue. I meet a tolerable-looking young man and ask him home to supper——”

“Which means that you intend him for another victim.”

“Which means I intend to have my own way, whether you like it or not. Now I’ll tell you what it is, Fanny: if you’re going to make yourself disagreeable you’d better go to bed at once, for I won’t stand it. I didn’t engage you to act my mother.”

“Don’t be afraid. Just let me have my supper, and I’ll fall fast asleep on the sofa or go to bed, whichever you prefer, and you can have the young man all to yourself.”

“You can fall asleep as much as ever you like, but you shan’t go to bed till I do. You served me that trick once or twice with Lord Henry, and cut my evening short entirely.”

“You need not have followed me.”

“As if I was going to risk my reputation!” says Stella, with a grand air.

“No; you won’t risk any of your own possessions, but you don’t care how you imperil those of others. Some men have hearts, you should remember, Stella.”

But at this ridiculous suggestion Miss Beauchamp laughs so loud, that she startles the young man waiting for her in the next room. In another minute

she has burst upon his view, more beautiful even, as it appears to him, than she looked upon the stage. She is attired in a dress of the palest tea-green silk, and her beautiful bosom and arms, partly hidden, partly exposed, are veiled with some soft clinging lace. It is an old dress, with many a stain and spot on it when viewed by the treacherous daylight; but how is young Amory to know that, or what should he care? All he sees is the golden hair that is piled upon her head; the large blue melting eyes that look straight into his own; the frank mouth with its red lips and dazzling teeth; the white skin and the delicately tinted dress. He sees before him a vision of beauty, and, what is far more attractive to him, of grace and elegance, such as he has never been brought in close contact with before; and as he gazes at her his breath almost stops with wonderment and admiration.

For James Amory, although country bred and born, possesses an innate love of refinement that is seldom gratified in his present position. He sees and associates with plenty of women; but they are not the sort of women whom he prefers. Second-rate actresses, singers, and ballet-girls are not the people with whom he can form more than mere acquaintance. He is awkward and uncouth himself; he is not at home in good society, but he can appreciate it; and his usual companions are not gentlemen

and ladies, but he knows ladies and gentlemen when he sees them, and he enjoys their company far more than he does that of his own class. He is in fact himself a gentleman in all but his antecedents and surroundings; and for this reason he feels his *gaucherie* in the presence of Miss Beauchamp far more than he would otherwise have done.

"I wish I had gone home and changed my dress," he says distressfully, as she comes upon him in her graceful evening attire.

"Now really, Mr. Amory, if you say another word about that, we shall quarrel. If I throw off one dress I must put on another, you know, and this is as old as the hills. And you look so homelike and comfortable in that tweed, too. Hard work acting, isn't it?" she continues, as she pulls the bell and orders the supper.

"Very hard. And you have had so much of it lately."

"My whole life is composed of it. I commence a London engagement directly after Easter. I am coming out in an entirely new part. Shall you be up in town this season?"

"I don't know. I am afraid there is no chance. I have never been there yet, as I told you."

"O, you *must* come. Your voice would create quite a *furore* at the ballad concerts. How long have you been on the stage?"

"Two years."

The indignant Miss Reed has been disinterred from the bedroom by this time, and they are all sitting round the table, occupied in the discussion of a capital supper.

"Two years! And lived in the provinces all that time! Isn't it a shame, Fanny? Did you ever hear such a lovely voice as Mr. Amory has — so clear and sweet and liquid? I think it beats poor dear Giuglini's all to nothing."

"O Miss Beauchamp, you do me too much honour," says the young man, reddening to the roots of his hair.

"I am only telling you the truth. You don't know your own value, evidently. Has no one ever suggested a London engagement to you before?"

"No one. You see I am a pupil of Mr. Halsted's brother, and articted to him for three years; and so——"

"He considers it more profitable to keep you in Leadstone, playing all their principal parts, and pocketing half your salary. Exactly so. But I wonder none of the London *impresarios* have found you out, and made you an offer. I wish *I* were at the head of an operatic company, Mr. Amory; you would not have to wait long for one then."

"O madam, I don't know how to thank you for your good opinion. But I thought that in London

you had so many excellent voices, that it would be useless for me to attempt to get employment there."

"Not such voices as yours, Mr. Amory. The remembrance of that song is thrilling me through at this moment. Have another patty, Reedy, do! You know you can eat six at a sitting, when we're alone."

"I have had enough, I am obliged to you," replies Reedy, in tones of the most awful severity.

"Very good, please yourself; but don't blame me afterwards. What would I *not* give to sing like you, Mr. Amory!"

"But you must be able to sing. Your voice in speaking is so full—so rich—so——"

"Well, some people might call it singing; but I don't. I attempted a ballad in public once, but I think my audience took it for a comic song, they laughed so. I wish I could learn."

"Have you never tried?" demands Amory, eagerly.

"I did once, but I didn't like my teacher; and so much depends on the teacher, you know. Do you ever give lessons?"

"Yes, constantly. I have above a dozen pupils in Leadstone. If——"

"Now what *were* you going to say?"

"You will promise not to think me presumptuous, but I am *sure* you could sing; and if I might be so bold as to offer——"

"Not marriage, Mr. Amory!" she cries, laughing. "I never accept an offer on so short a notice."

The singer's face is painful to look at in its confusion.

"O madam," he commences, "you could not have thought—you could never have imagined——"

"Miss Beauchamp is never slow to imagine anything that can add another grain to her good opinion of herself," interposes Miss Reed, grimly.

"Now could I have chosen a more discreet duenna for myself than that, Mr. Amory? She never loses an opportunity of saying something nasty, or of spoiling my fun. Never mind, Reedy. We all know the reason you are so bitter; but the luck may change, my dear. 'While there's life there's hope,' and 'When the night's at the darkest, dawn is near.'"

"If you're alluding to any such frivolous pleasures as *you* indulge in, Stella, I may be thankful I have been preserved from them."

The young man watches the elder lady during the delivery of these speeches with a look as though he would like to bite her head off; but he is too unversed in the art of polite fencing to unsheath his sword in Miss Beauchamp's defence; so he only looks uncomfortable, and feels somehow as though he must be in the wrong.

But Stella turns to him when the wordy war is

ended with such perfect ease, that he cannot but feel easy too.

"To revert to our subject, Mr. Amory. I think you were going to offer to give me some singing-lessons?"

"If you would not esteem it a liberty——"

"Why, it was just what I was going to ask you to do for me. How strange we should have thought of the same thing, isn't it? I think it would be charming, if you have the time——"

"I will *make* the time," he answers, fervently; and Miss Reed's sharp eyes see that his head is rapidly going after the heads of the many victims slain before him.

"That will be delightful, for I am sure there will be nothing to do in this horrid place. And we have a piano here, you see, and everything ready. Oh, and *will* you sing me something now, Mr. Amory, if you have quite done your supper? *Do, please!* It would give me *so much* pleasure."

Mr. Amory is in his glory. He cannot talk well, or behave well, or even look very well in society; but he *can sing*. And who could refuse to do anything when under the battery of those wonderful eyes? He rises with alacrity, and goes straight to the piano. Miss Beauchamp follows him, but not before Miss Reed has had time to whisper, "*Shall I go to sleep at once?*" But "I wish you were at the bottom of the

sea," is all the answer she receives. After a few bars of symphony, Amory commences an impassioned love-song, and proves that if he cannot improvise a conversation, he knows at least how to give expression to that which others have composed for him. His rich voice sinks and swells with equal facility; and as the last notes die away in a whisper, Miss Reed's applause is almost as enthusiastic as Miss Beauchamp's.

"You must begin to teach me to-morrow," says Stella, bending towards him. "What time will you come—twelve—two? I don't suppose I shall go out all day."

"*To-morrow?*" he repeats, with knitted brows. "I'm afraid I *can't* come to-morrow, madam. I have an oratorio rehearsal in Bettley at two, which will detain me till late in the afternoon."

"Another oratorio rehearsal? Why, you were at one this morning."

"I was; but we perform next week. I have but two more."

"And aren't you perfect?"

"I think so; but the choruses are very shaky, and I have some part of the 'coaching' to do."

"How tiresome, when I have only a fortnight here altogether. And I am so *impatient* to begin."

Mr. Amory blushes again with pleasure.

"I shall be at liberty all next week," he says, in a glow.

"Next week is ages away. How provoking you should be engaged! But it's always the case with everything I want to do; how ever I shall pass the time in this horrid place I don't know. Are you *sure* you can't come to-morrow?"

"I am afraid I must say *quite sure*," replies the young man, looking much perplexed.

"Well, it can't be helped. But we wont make any engagement, then, for I may change my mind about the lessons. I'm a changeable creature, and never stick to one thing long."

"Oh, don't say that!" cries Mr. Amory.

"She never said a truer word," interposes Miss Reed.

"You shut up, Reedy. No one wants you to take singing-lessons. We wont say anything more about it to-night, then, Mr. Amory; but I shall see you to-morrow at the theatre, perhaps, and then, if I still feel in the mood for it, we may fix an hour."

"I do *wish* I could come to-morrow," he replies, in a downcast tone, his hopes vanishing with the uncertain accents of her voice, as he rises and holds his hat in his hand, and keeps smoothing the nap round in an aimless manner.

"Oh, it's of no consequence. I daresay I should have been too tired to sing if you *had* come. Good-

night, Mr. Amory. Thanks for your very charming song. We shall hear you in London yet. Good-night." And she dismisses the unhappy young man with a careless voice and gesture, so different from the look and tone of interest with which she had lured him to her side, that he walks home to his little lodging utterly despondent, though he could not explain why, and disposed to find fault with and grumble at everything which until that evening has served his turn so well, and been accepted as a cause for gratitude.

"Well, having made that young fellow completely miserable, perhaps you'll come to bed," remarks Miss Reed, as the door closes behind their guest.

"What have I done to make him miserable? You heard him say yourself that he will be engaged all to-morrow. You wouldn't have had me go down on my knees, and implore him to break his engagement in order to sing with me, would you?"

"Not exactly; but neither would I have had you hang over him at the piano, and look straight into his face with those big eyes of yours, as if he was the sole object of interest to you in the world. You know you're trying to turn his head."

"And if so, it will be as good and innocent an amusement as I am likely to find in Leadstone. Young men must have their heads turned occasionally. It's good for them. Else what were we women made

for? However, my dear, you see that as yet he prefers his stupid oratorio rehearsal to me, so I don't suppose there's much harm done."

"It's not your fault if there isn't; for I believe you'd give him any amount of pain to amuse yourself. You have no heart, Stella."

"Who said I had? And what should I do with it, if I possessed one? I am a 'star,' am I not? Who ever heard of a star with a heart? I've had plenty in my hands, but I don't think I ever had one inside my body. I was manufactured by some patent process without."

"That's impossible. "You'll feel it stirring in you some day when you least expect it; and then you'll know what you have made others feel."

"La, how virtuous we've grown! Excuse me, Fanny, but I can't stand you in a moralizing mood, particularly at dead of night—so I'll go to bed. Good-night."

CHAPTER III.

A Dangerous Tête-à-tête.

THE next morning opens with a drizzling rain.

Leadstone streets are dark and muddy, and the first thing that greets Stella Beauchamp's tardily-opening eyes is a note from Mrs. Halsted, to ask if she and Miss Reed will join their family dinner that day at four o'clock.

"The woman must be *mad*," she says, in a quietly wondering way to Fanny Reed. "Fancy asking me to sit down to beef and cabbage at four o'clock in the afternoon, and thirteen children with their noses in every stage of cleanliness ranged round the table!"

"Has Mrs. Halsted thirteen children?" inquires her matter-of-fact companion.

"I believe so. At least I know she was married ten years ago, and has been having babies ever since without the slightest interruption. Poor Emma! And now she wants to drag me down into this slough of despond with her, and sit at the same table with her olive-branches. She must have gone stark-staring mad."

"She intends it for kindness, I have no doubt. And for my part, I should like to go. I think it will be a nice cosy party," says the degenerate Miss Reed.

"Why don't you go, then? You don't suppose I want you here, do you? Or that I can't eat my cutlet without your assistance? Go, by all means, and help to blow the noses of the family."

"My dear, when you are put out of temper you get coarse."

"I am not out of temper; I am simply bored. But that is no reason you should be bored too. Do go. Now I come to consider, it will be rather a relief to get rid of you."

"You are most complimentary. I think, under the circumstances, I shall go."

"I wish to goodness you would!"

Miss Reed does not believe that when the time comes the *exigeante* Stella will let her off duty quite so easily, but she is mistaken. Breakfast at twelve carries them well into the afternoon, and when two o'clock arrives, Miss Beauchamp is not only willing but anxious that her companion should set off.

"I don't half like leaving you," says Miss Reed, who has become quite sympathetic under the other's affability.

"What nonsense, Fanny! As if I had never spent a couple of hours alone before! Besides, it will be a charity to me if you do go. I want a dozen yards of tulle and some more of that blue rucheing, and get me a white ostrich-tip if you can. It's terrible to get so near the end of one's tour, and find one is 'out' of everything. These provincial towns are such hopeless bivouacs."

"I am afraid I shall never get the kind of ostrich-tip you want," says Miss Reed, with a dubious shake of the head. "You remember I tried in Glasgow, and failed."

"Never mind. Get the best you can; they wont find out the difference here. Oh, and do bring me some more gloves—three buttons, if they've got them."

"If I'm to choose so many things, I'd better set

out at once, Stella, for I don't know any of the shops here."

"Ah, that is just what I want you to do. I shall not be able to settle down comfortably to my novel till you are gone."

"And shall I come back here and show you my purchases before I go on to the Halsteds'?"

"Gracious me, no! What on earth should you do that for? You're not going to carry all the parcels about yourself, are you? Tell the people to put them down to my name, and send them home here."

"Oh, very good. But in that case I needn't start so soon."

"Yes, you need. You'll want all the light to-day will give you for that blue. Now do go at once, Fanny. It worries me to see you fidgeting about the room."

"You seem very anxious to get rid of me," replies Miss Reed, as she takes her leave a few minutes after.

And she is not mistaken. As soon as her duenna's back is turned Miss Beauchamp leaps from the sofa, and rings the bell.

"If a gentleman—a Mr. Amory—inquires for me, show him up here."

"Very good, Miss."

And then she takes a little note from her pocket, and throws it into the fire.

"I mustn't let the gentleman suspect his note was preserved for even one hour," she ruminates as she sees it burn, "or he may grow conceited. A funny idea, his throwing up his oratorio engagement in order to sing with me. I suppose he loses money by it. What can the foolish fellow be thinking of? Now if Fanny had seen that note of his she would have sat in my pocket all the afternoon. She really does exceed her duty. She is the most horrible wet blanket that was ever imagined. And though it is no matter when one has *made* a friend, her extreme zeal is rather apt to cut my flirtations short in the bud. And I have taken a fancy to teach this young Amory to flirt. I am sure he's got the talent in him, only it wants development. It will be tit for tat. He shall teach me to sing, and I will teach him——"

"Mr. Amory," interrupts the waiter, opening the door; and the next moment they are standing together.

"So good of you to come!" she exclaims, impressively.

"So good of you to let me, madam," he replies. "When I ventured to send you that note this morning I hardly dared to expect so gracious an answer. I have brought several songs, you see, and one or two duets, if you would like to try them over with me."

"Oh, let us have a little chat first, and go to business afterwards. We have plenty of time before us, Mr. Amory. Reedy has gone to dine with the Halstedes."

"Indeed! And you are left alone?"

"Yes; by my own desire. I was asked, of course, but I refused point-blank. I don't care about family dinners, and I thought—I fancied perhaps—I might amuse myself better *here*, Mr. Amory."

"Are you so fond of singing, then?"

"Well, not exactly of singing; but I love talking, and I have an idea—I dare say you'll call me very foolish—but the first moment I saw your face I knew we should get on well together. It's not every one I *can* get on with, you know, Mr. Amory."

"Really! truly!" exclaims the young man, so agitated he hardly knows what he does say.

"Yes, really; there are some people to whom I *cannot* talk." (This is a delusion on Miss Beauchamp's part: the said people having never been seen by any eye but her own; but it is a genuine delusion all the same, and she quite believes it.)

"And there are others, again," she continues, sweetly, "with whom I feel at home at once—to whom I should like to tell all my thoughts, and hear theirs in return, and be certain they were as interested in my affairs as I should be in theirs."

"They must be very happy people about whom you think like that, Miss Beauchamp."

"Now is that truth or flattery, Mr. Amory? Of what value should my poor little interest be to any one?"

"I should say it must be *everything*."

"Oh, fie! how you exaggerate! But come, if you have not been telling dreadful stories, let me hear something about yourself. What made you first think of the profession, and where did you fall in with the Halsteds?"

"I am afraid you will think my story a very tame one, Miss Beauchamp. I am the son of a farmer in Yorkshire, but I always liked music better than herding cattle, and used to get terrible thrashings from my father when quite a youngster for leaving the pigs and cows to look after themselves whilst I stole into the parish church and listened to the organist at practice."

"How interesting!" she sighs, with her beautiful eyes searching his countenance. Young Amory meets her glance, and turns uneasily away. "Do go on."

"After awhile the organist noticed my taste, and began to give me a few lessons, just for good-nature; and by the time I was sixteen I used to do half his work, and lead the church choir."

"You clever creature!"

"Well, then father got vexed over it, and said I neglected the farm-work, and ordered me to give up the organ, and I refused; and there was a row between us, which ended in my going to York to some friends of the organist. And after I had been there some years, and got several pupils and an engagement at the Catholic church, Mr. Halsted came with a 'star' company to York and heard me sing. So he told his brother, I suppose, and the brother offered to take me as articled pupil and put me on the stage. That's about three years ago, and I've been taking lessons of him ever since. But I hope I shall be able to stand by myself before long now."

"You *ought* to, I am sure. You will never be content to spend your life in this grubby old town, and in the drudgery of teaching, will you?"

"Not now," replies James Amory, with a new light in his eyes; "but until yesterday I do not think my ambition soared much higher."

"And do you mean to say that I——"

"Your good opinion is the most valuable praise that I have ever won, Miss Beauchamp."

"It is like your kindness to say so; but I have told you I am no musician. How should I be a judge of singing?"

"In that case I should be no judge of acting; yet who that saw you play last night could ever forget it?"

"I am glad you admired it. It is such a pleasure to me to hear you say so," she coos at him with half-closed eyes. "But you really must begin to think about coming to London. I shall not be satisfied till I hear what they say of you in town."

"You may be sure I shall strain every nerve to procure an engagement there, if you say you wish it. But I fear it will be very difficult, my name is so completely unknown."

"Ah, you will have to change your name."

"To change my name! Why?"

"It is not romantic enough. We all do it. Do you suppose my name is Stella Beauchamp?"

"I *did* think so."

"Indeed it is not. I am called Annie Field! but no one would guess whom you meant if you spoke of me so. What is your Christian name?"

"James."

"Oh, that would never do! James Amory! It neither looks well nor sounds well. It is ugly altogether."

"I know it is," he says, dejectedly.

"For a bill, I mean. But nothing is easier than to change it."

"I am sure I should never know how to forge another."

"Let me help you; may I? Will you leave me to choose your professional name?"

"O madam, if you will do me so great an honour."

"I chose my own. First I turned Field into Beauchamp, and then I found there were so many Annies I rechristened myself; and as a gentleman once behind the scenes had called me 'Stella,' because I wore a large star on my head, I took the hint, and came out as Stella Beauchamp. Pretty name, isn't it?"

"Very pretty. I have always thought so when I saw it printed."

"I have used it so long now that I have almost forgotten it is not my own. Would your mother's name help us to a choice for you, Mr. Amory?"

"Her name was Carr."

"Carr! Carr! That's too short; Carrington would be better. *Carrington Amory*. No, I don't like that. *Amory Carrington*. That's worse still. Two long names should never follow one another. Can't we cut off the *y*? *Amor Carrington*. That sounds better. How would that do for you? I rather like it," she says, with a look as though she were weighing a matter of the profoundest interest herself.

"*Amor!* Is that not rather a strange name for a man? I never heard it before."

"All the better. The more remarkable your name is, the more it attracts notice. I think it's pretty.

Amor, Latin for love, you know, and mine is Latin for a star; rather remarkable coincidence, isn't it?"

"It is too much honour that you should choose my name for me, Miss Beauchamp."

"Is it a settled thing, then?"

"If you wish it, yes."

"Well, I should like you to adopt it. I think it's uncommon. And when I see it placarded in immense letters all over London, I shall feel as though in some measure you belonged to me, you know, and half the glory of *Amor Carrington* should fall to my share."

"How can you speak so, who have won so much glory for yourself? My poor name will never be known as yours is."

"I don't know that. You cannot think how much we want new tenors in London. You will be snapped up directly you are heard."

"You raise my hopes so high that I shall be beside myself."

"Come, let us go to the piano then, by all means, before you quite lose your senses, Mr. *Amor Carrington*. Doesn't the new name come pat? I shall never call you anything else now."

"Pray do not. I feel as if I were some creation of your own when I hear you utter it."

"Ah, you will get so much praise soon, you will not care for mine."

The young man does not answer her excepting by a look, and they seat themselves together at the piano. When Miss Reed returns, she is astonished beyond measure to find the gentleman who was supposed to be practising at Bettley practising at Leadstone.

"How very strange!" she ejaculates. "Mr. and Mrs. Halsted quite thought you were at Bettley, Mr. Amory."

"You are not to call him 'Amory' any more, Fanny. I have rechristened him, and he is coming out in London as Mr. Amor Carrington."

"Has he an engagement in town, then?"

"Not yet, perhaps; but he is soon to have."

"Well, for my own part, I never could understand why people's private names should not be good enough for the public. So long as you do your duty, what earthly difference can a name make?"

"That's all you know about it, Reedy. Now go and take your bonnet off, there's a good old thing. Did you have a nice dinner?"

"Charming, my dear. Filleted soles and a rump-steak pie, and——"

"There, don't make me ill before mine comes. Mr. Carrington, I have been working that lovely voice of yours to death. You must stop and take some dinner with me."

"I had no intention—I am not prepared——" he begins, confusedly, yet red with delight.

"You want no preparation. I shall make none. Just ring the bell, Fanny, and tell them to lay covers for two: and let us have some champagne. Shall we try the duet over again, Mr. Carrington, or will you sing a solo? I would much rather listen to your voice than my own."

And so James Amory (or Amor Carrington, as he must now be called, to avoid confusion) spends another dangerous hour in this woman's presence, and returns home to dress for the theatre, with his head swimming from the intoxication of her society.

The reception that Stella Beauchamp receives to-night is still greater than it was on the occasion of her first appearance. The London star has made a decided success. She will have crowded houses to the end of her fortnight's engagement, and be an acknowledged favourite henceforth and for ever of the people of Leadstone. For though rough and ready they are staunch and faithful in their likes and dislikes, and no manager has ever ventured to bring a second time to Leadstone any artist who has not won their genuine approval from the first. The play is enthusiastically applauded throughout, and through the poisoning scene a pin might be heard to drop in the theatre; which gives all the better scope for the delivery of Carrington's song, which he sings with a

fervour and passion that perfectly startle his audience. When the curtain has descended for the last time, and Stella, looking dazzlingly handsome in her stage-dress, is standing in the midst of a little knot of admirers behind the scenes, she looks for Carrington, and perceives him amongst the company; not attired carelessly as he was the night before, but dressed in evening clothes, as though he had been summoned to an audience with a princess. Miss Beauchamp guesses the motive, and smiles approval of his chivalry; she even beckons him to her side, when no one else is looking, and lays her hand for a moment in his own.

"It was even sweeter than before," she whispers to him. "Where do you get all that melody from? Do you keep a nightingale imprisoned in your throat?"

"I think I *have* a bird singing somewhere in my heart to-night," he answers, gaily, "though I do not know in what my song excelled that of yesterday."

"In richness and depth and fervour. It had more soul in it," says Stella Beauchamp.

"That must be because last night James Amory sang to the audience, and to-night——"

"What of to-night?" she urges.

"To-night, madam, Amor Carrington sang *to you*," he says, in a low voice that is half afraid to hear itself.

* * * * *

"We were greatly disappointed not to see you at

dinner-to day, Stella!" exclaims Mrs. Halsted, coming between them. "The children had so looked forward to knowing you personally. They had quite a little stock of questions to put to you."

The look on Miss Beauchamp's face expresses anything but interest.

"Indeed! dear little creatures; how nice of them! But you know, Emma, I never accept an invitation when I am playing."

"Not to a dinner-party, perhaps, but this was quite *en famille*. Only ourselves, you know, and the dear children—so snug and comfortable. Now you'll join us to-morrow, wont you?"

"Indeed, I would rather——"

"Oh, I will take no excuses. It cannot be any fatigue to get into a carriage and drive to our house; and you shall leave directly dinner is over, if you wish it. It will be just the same as though you were in your own rooms."

"But, Emma, if you only knew how pertinaciously I——"

"Now you must not be pertinacious with me, Stella, for I've quite set my heart on this. And here's poor Amory too. He'll be frightfully disappointed if you wont come. Try and persuade her with me, Mr. Amory—do."

"I cannot dare to hope——" commences Carrington.

Miss Beauchamp wheels round and confronts him.

"Are you amongst the captured, then?"

"Yes, indeed," replies Mrs. Halsted. "Do you suppose everybody is as backward as yourself to give us a little pleasure?"

"Oh, come, Emma, you shan't say that of me again—after all your kindness too! I accept your invitation."

"You *will* dine with us?"

"Have I not said it?"

"That's a good girl! How delighted Mr. Halsted will be when I tell him! For you see his duties in the house are so laborious he has seen less of you than any one. And he admires you immensely, Stella. I tell him he talks of nothing else, and I shall be quite jealous if it goes on."

"Oh, don't let me be the unhappy cause of any matrimonial rupture between you and Mr. Halsted," cries the beautiful actress, laughing. "I have enough sins of my own to account for, without becoming responsible for those of others."

"I daresay! Quite a string of broken hearts to haunt you. She'll leave a few behind her in Leadstone, Amory, I shouldn't wonder."

"I will engage to tinker up all I break. It doesn't take long to mend a heart, does it, Mr. Carrington? A little absence, a little time, and a new object will

stick a broken heart together again as effectually as though it were made of china, and they were the component parts of diamond cement."

"But if you let the best china fall, my dear, it usually splits into such tiny fragments, remember, that you cannot even find them again. A vase is ugly enough with cracks across it, but it becomes useless if it has a hole."

"Bless me, Emma, you're quite a philosopher! Mr. Carrington's eyes are starting out of his head in a vain attempt to fathom the depth of your meaning."

"Why do you call him *Carrington*?" demands Mrs. Halsted, quickly.

They explain the new arrangement to her, and she looks suspiciously from one to the other, and does not seem to like the idea.

"I'm sure Mr. Halsted wont hear of any change whilst you're with him, Amory," she says, in reply. "So you will have to pocket the new name for a year or two."

"As if you were going to play for old Halsted for another couple of years!" whispers Stella to him upon the next opportunity.

"I hope not; I should be miserable if I thought it were likely, *now*!" he answers, with a look that causes her to shake her fan at him.

"We shall meet to-morrow, then," are her last

words as he attends her to her carriage. "*Au revoir.*"

"Good-night," he answers, and stands there for some time after the vehicle has driven away with a look of rapturous expectation on his face.

* * * * *

On the following afternoon Mrs. Halsted's dinner is prepared, and all things are made ready for the advent of Miss Beauchamp. The children are posed about the room in various attitudes of expectation. Mr. Amor Carrington, who has employed half the morning in thinking how he shall dress himself for the afternoon, and whose attire in consequence is a little more countrified and less becoming than usual, fidgets from window to mantelpiece and mantelpiece to window. Mrs. Halsted is beginning to have misgivings as to whether the fish will not be overdone, and Mr. Halsted is beginning to think he should like to have his dinner at whatever stage of cooking it may have arrived, when up rolls the well-known hotel vehicle to the door, and down comes the knocker with a double rap. "Here they are!" exclaims the mistress of the house, confidently. "Go and meet her, George, and bring her upstairs."

The husband rushes off to obey orders; the children huddle close together and begin to giggle and whisper; young Amor feels hot and cold by turns, and Mrs. Halsted, charged with welcome, fills up the open

doorway, when back comes George with Miss Reed upon his arm."

"Why, where is Stella?" cries his wife, in a tone of disappointment. "She has surely not played us false again!"

Young Carrington's flushed face turns white.

"I was so sorry to be obliged to come without her," says Fanny Reed, apologetically. "I was afraid you would consider me a terribly bad substitute; but Stella was detained at the very last moment. She begged me to make her most humble apologies to you all."

"Detained by what? I hope she isn't ill."

"Nothing of the sort. She had dressed to start, when a friend turned up unexpectedly; and you know what Stella is. She insisted upon staying behind to dine with him."

"It is a gentleman, then?"

"Do you suppose she would stay at home for a lady? How do you do, Mr. Amory? Bless me, how pale you are! I hope you're quite well."

"Quite so, thank you!" returns the young man, with an uneasy smile.

"Come downstairs, Amory, and have a glass of wine," interposes the host. "You look a bit done up this afternoon."

But he lingers to hear his fate.

"Who is the gentleman, my dear? I suppose it's no secret."

"By no means. I wish Stella *would* keep it a little more secret than she does, for I don't like the man myself. It's Lord Henry Mecklington. He was always after her at Liverpool, and he pretends to have business now that's taking him through Leadstone to the North. But I don't believe a word of it."

"La, my dear, a lord! I don't wonder the girl's head is turned by his attentions, though I wish he could have come some other day. Well, we needn't wait dinner for her anyway. Come along, children; it's another disappointment for you, but I shouldn't wonder if Miss Beauchamp came to dine with us yet. Lead the way, papa. No ceremony, Miss Reed. Go on, Amory; and I hope the wait will have improved our appetites, that's all."

A lord! and sitting in that room alone with her, side by side upon the very sofa, perhaps, where *he* and she sat yesterday!

Amor Carrington, as the unwelcome thought intrudes itself upon his meal, feels as if the food he ate would choke him.

CHAPTER IV.

A Check for the Tenor.

"If I don't take care I shall be making a fool of myself," thinks Amor Carrington, as he walks home after the Halsteds' dinner.

He pushes his long locks off his heated forehead as the thought passes through his mind, and sighs deeply. He is not in love with Miss Beauchamp—after a couple of days' acquaintance that would be rather *too* absurd, so he tells himself—but he is beginning to feel restless and dissatisfied away from her presence; and dissatisfaction is a new sensation on the part of Amor Carrington. He is such a good honest young fellow; he has been so easily contented hitherto with the few benefits the world has afforded him. To tramp backwards and forwards to the theatre; to study his parts; to have an occasional holiday for cricket, boating, or shooting,—these occupations have made up the sum-total of his existence, and hitherto he has been quite happy so to exist. A few days ago, had he been offered a permanent engagement in Leadstone, he would have considered himself the luckiest of mortals; he would have accepted it on the spot, and bound himself down to live and die in that most uninteresting of manufacturing towns, prepared to occupy those two small

rooms which now own him as temporary proprietor *in perpetua*. But not to marry! He may sometimes have contemplated the possibility of his becoming a family man and the progenitor of a race of little tenors; but Amor Carrington has no false sentiment in his composition, and knows that the longer he can keep his feet out of the net the better. Even with the glamour of Stella Beauchamp's attractions upon him, and the disappointment caused by her not keeping her promise to dine with the Halsteds, he has strength enough to reason with his own folly.

"Why should I be so cut up about her not coming?" he thinks. "She's nothing to me; and in a few days she'll be gone from Leadstone, and probably I shall never see her more. It's very pleasant, of course, and intoxicating, and all that sort of thing, to associate with her; but I mustn't lose sight of the difference in our positions, or I shall be getting into a scrape."

He has reached his lodgings by this time. How small and dingy they look after the spacious rooms at the hotel, even by comparison with the Halsteds' ordinary but commodious house! And yet a few weeks back, when Miss Carrie Rivers and Miss Bella Trotman, of the Theatre Royal, Leadstone, and dear old Butt the organist, and young Williams from the Post-office, had joined his modest supper-party in that very room, how comfortable and pretty they had all

declared and he had thought it to be! Now, as he throws himself down into the horsehair arm-chair and glances at the crimson and green carpet, and mentally contrasts its colour with that of the neutral-tinted material in which it was Miss Beauchamp's pleasure to appear last before him, he could almost shake himself for the folly of which he is guilty.

"I am a fool! I am a —— fool!" he keeps on repeating, using stronger language than that to which his equable temperament generally accommodates itself. "How can she look upon me, except as on a country clod, whose awkwardness may afford her some amusement in the absence of all else? She, who is surrounded by friends; on intimate terms with such men as this Lord Henry Mecklington—curse him!—and will probably end by marrying him or some other fellow of the aristocracy. And I have been idiotic enough to fancy she felt the least pleasure—even the very least—in my company or conversation! Well, it's over now. I see the danger plainly before me, and I should be a madman not to avoid it. I won't go to the hotel any more, not even if she asks me; and as soon as ever she's out of Leadstone, I'll set to work and forget her."

He catches up a photograph of her as he speaks—one which he bought for a shilling out of the stationer's window—with the intention of thrusting it out of sight. But it has been taken in a very seduc-

tive attitude, and the beautiful eyes seem to flash an invitation to him from the cardboard.

"How pretty she is!" he thinks, unable to resist the temptation of looking at the portrait. "How delicate! how refined! how different from other women! A creature like this is too good for the stage altogether. She ought to be clothed and attended on and served like a queen; as I have no doubt the man who is hanging about her now thinks, and I've no right to blame him for it. He will make her 'my lady' if he's got the least sense in his head, and then she will get into the swellest society in London, where a fellow like myself will not even be allowed to kiss the hem of her garment."

Yet he kisses the photograph quickly and passionately.

"I am glad she likes my voice," he says to himself. "I think she was genuine in saying that; and I could see she liked it by the softening in her eyes. Bless her! Well, I don't think I shall ever forget the few hours we have spent together; but I won't go near her any more whilst she's in Leadstone. I'll be shot if I will!"

He closes the drawer again, which he had opened to receive the photograph, and places it reverently on the mantelpiece instead, but with its face to the wall; then passes with another heavy sigh into his

bedroom, and commences his preparations for the evening.

The play to-night is preceded by an operetta, in which Amor Carrington takes the leading part. It is a humorous trifle, full of jests and comic songs, and the tenor's heart sinks heavier with every note he sings. How often is this farce repeated in real life! How often are we called on to appear before the public, and go through our little comedy with sparkling eyes and mouths stretched from ear to ear, whilst we can hear the dull sound made by the blood that is dropping from our hearts! How do we live through those moments? How tough we are! How hard to kill! We do survive them somehow, but I don't think that we ever forget them. They score our hearts backwards and forwards with deep indentations, as careful mothers scratch with scissors the soles of their children's new shoes to prevent their falling down; and if some of us could be turned inside out we should be found a mass of hieroglyphics. I wonder sometimes if even the bliss of Heaven will be deep enough to utterly erase them.

As the curtain falls upon the operetta, and Carrington leaves the stage, he runs up against Miss Beauchamp, standing with a stranger behind the scenes. He wears a hat upon his head, and intuitively he removes it in her presence. She regards him for a moment haughtily, not knowing who it is

in blue and white satin that doffs his plumes and *aigrette* for her benefit; then recognising Carrington, she bestows on him the slightest and most careless of nods.

"Who is that cad?" Lord Henry remarks, politely, long before he is out of hearing.

A trembling hope comes over him; perhaps she may say a word in deprecation of the term.

But Stella Beauchamp only laughs lightly and briefly. The sound stings him, and he rushes away without ascertaining if the laugh is followed by any allusion to himself. He watches her fiercely and hungrily whenever she is off the stage that night. He abuses himself for his folly and conceit, and yet he cannot help it. The man who is dancing attendance on her appears, in Carrington's eyes, so unworthy of the place she has awarded him.

Lord Henry Mecklington is about fifty, well preserved and well-looking—thanks to his tailor and hairdresser—but with an assumption of being completely *blasé*, and considering nothing in the world good enough for him, that is insufferably sickening to all minds that are genuine themselves, and hate the cant of humbug in another. He aspires to be a Bohemian without having the least idea in what Bohemianism consists. He comes fresh from the slow and stuck-up receptions of his own class, to seek relief behind the scenes of a theatre, or in a music-

hall, bringing with him all the fopperies, affectations, and fastidious follies of the "upper ten." It is as though you brought a painted peacock to try his strength between the shafts of a plough. All Lord Henry can do is to look askance at everything that surrounds him, trip about the dirty boards as though he were walking in a farmyard, and try to persuade the women who are silly enough or idle enough to listen that they are far too good for the atmosphere in which they move.

There are Bohemians and Bohemians. The true Bohemian, I take it, is the man—well-born or otherwise—who, sick of the trammels of what is termed society, of the artificiality, the lies, the sham propriety that obtain in that class which make their lives miserable for the sole purpose, apparently of making their fellow-creatures' lives miserable also, determines to shake himself free of it, and to live in that manner which best suits the work it has been given him to do.

The Bohemian is always a working man. If he is a mere idler he does not deserve the name, nor has he earned the right to live the jolliest life in all the world. He is an artist of some sort—either an author or a painter, an actor or a musician. He may work for his bread, or he may be a dilettante; still he must do something before he is admitted to the chosen band. And who that has written, or painted, or re-

hearsed, or sung half the day, cares, when the first hour of rest arrives—the hour of dinner—to throw him or her self into the clothes of society, and attend the table of society to listen to the vapid twaddle of society, and to be cut out of every innocent domestic pleasure that is the well-won reward of labour? It is all very well for those who do nothing all their lives to make themselves remembered one hour after their deaths to kill the time that has no value in their eyes by dressing and undressing, and driving from one place to another, and talking to people for whom they do not care a rush. Their day and night consists of twenty-four long hours, and they must be got through somehow.

But the Bohemian, who devotes more than half his time to work, finds his leisure too precious to be wasted after such a fashion.

So he refuses to attend Lady B——'s stupid "At homes," and cannot be persuaded to make one of the dozen young men who have been caught for the Honourable Mrs. Flareup's dance, and ruin his digestion with her execrable sherry and "tinned lobster" salads. He prefers to lounge away the evening at his club, talking with the leading men of the day, both literary and artistic; or even sitting down to a cosy little dinner and a bottle of chablis with the woman he likes best.

Ah, Lady B—— and Mrs. Flareup! I daresay you

will wag your immaculate heads over this outspoken page of mine, and thank Heaven you know nothing of such things, and never will do. You are, doubtless, right; but it is no cause for thanking Providence, I can assure you. Thank it rather when, by force of nature or your own bad sherry, it brings your useless and uninteresting lives to a close, and ushers in—who knows?—a glorious future, when our children shall be all Bohemians, and the reign of Folly and Impropriety be over! Yes, I write that last noun advisedly, for whatever you may say or think, the real impropriety belongs to your class, and not to that which you affect to despise. Hard workers have no time for sickly sentimentality. It is the loungers in satin-covered boudoirs that read the great lesson to mankind of the ill-effects of idleness; and when one of these be-dressed and be-scented articles of masculine aristocracy wishes to make his colleagues open their eyes and think him a dashing fine fellow, his ambition becomes to mix with a class who have no more fellowship with him than a mastiff with a greyhound, and calling himself a Bohemian, to try and spread broadcast his sentimental immorality, and judge of their habits by his own.

This is what Lord Henry Mecklington does. He is a bachelor and a man of property, free to go where and do what he likes. He is idle, and he is vicious. Bound, as he imagines, by the exigences of society to

perform, during the season, a certain amount of treadmill work in the way of attending dinners, dances, and afternoon parties, he revenges himself for the rest of the year by leading what he calls a Bohemian life. He is in the habit, on occasions, of boasting of it to his friends. "Oh, don't appeal to me on the subject; I am quite a Bohemian, you know!" Upon which, old Lady Mecklington, his mamma, will shrug her withered shoulders and shake her dyed front, and say she wishes "dear Henry wouldn't talk in such a dreadful manner." How surprised she would be to hear herself indignantly informed that her dear Henry is no more a Bohemian than she is; that he brings his affectation and his absurd assumption of superiority into a circle which neither understands the first nor acknowledges the second; and that, were it not for his title and position, not a woman would be found to listen to his inane conversation, or to evince the slightest pleasure in his society!

But women are like moths round a candle where a title is concerned, and feminine nature is much the same all the world over, from the palace to the green-room.

The flame is burning brightly near Stella Beauchamp's eyes at the present moment, and she will do nothing to risk her temporary reign. Each time she leaves the stage Lord Henry is waiting for her at the "flies," where, but the night before, she deputed

Amor Carrington to hold her shawl; neither does she notice the tenor by so much as a look or a smile, she is so afraid of rousing the anger of her aristocratic admirer; but she laughs and talks with her new friend glibly enough, and Carrington, watching from the opposite side, sees her blush and look down when Lord Henry whispers to her, and, playing with the flowers she carries in her hand, and which he feels are *his* gift, place some of them in the bosom of her dress.

The young man suffers under it; but it is only the sore feeling of wounded vanity that assails him; and he can recognise his weakness while he condemns it.

The scene in which he sings for the songless De Courcy is still to come—how jealous he has been of De Courcy hitherto, and how tame a position he now assumes in his eyes! and he thinks that Stella must acknowledge his presence then, for since the first evening she heard his song she has not failed to thank him at the conclusion of the play for the part he bears in it.

So he settles himself to his work expectantly. He hears the by-play with which she listens to his voice, the fall with which the song concludes. De Courcy flies past him over the pasteboard window-sill; in a few seconds the curtain will descend.

He is standing in the same place, when Lord

Henry, eager to be the first to congratulate Miss Beauchamp on her success, stumbles up against him.

"Out of my way, there!" says my lord, sharply, not recognising the young man in his plain clothes for one of the members of the company.

But Amor Carrington is not in the mood to take a slight from Lord Henry Mecklington quietly, and he replies with temper—

"Out of the way yourself! This is my place, and I shall stick to it. We want no outsiders blocking up behind."

The defiant tone startles the stranger. He scrutinizes Carrington's features earnestly.

"And pray who are you?" he demands.

"What business is that of yours?" is the rough answer. "Stand back, or you'll bring the scene down on you."

Lord Henry is insulted, and hot words begin to pass between them.

"Let me pass at once, young man. I insist on it."

"You may insist as long as you like. You don't come this way."

"We'll soon settle that," says his lordship, as he tries to push past the tenor.

Amor Carrington is on his feet in an instant, his green-grey eyes flashing fire, and all the blood in his body mounted to his face.

He is a broad athletic man, and Lord Henry

doesn't like the look of him. He draws back incontinently, and dabs his nose with his cambric handkerchief, as though he were quite at his ease, and didn't care.

"Oh! ah! you hardly expect me to soil my hands by fighting you, do you? But there are other ways, I fancy, of resenting the insults you have offered me. Ah, my dear Miss Beauchamp," he continues across the side-scenes, "so your hard work is really over at last. How delighted I am to be able to congratulate you on so complete a success! How *am* I to get at you? I thought to pass this way; but there appears to be an obstacle in the shape of this young man, who declines to move."

"Why, Mr. Carrington," cries Stella, the first time she has spoken to him during the evening, "don't you hear Lord Henry wishes to pass this way? Are you asleep, or dead, or what?"

"I am neither asleep nor dead, madam," he answers, wearily; "and if *you* desire that I shall rise to let the gentleman pass, I am willing to obey you."

Saying which Carrington drags himself up, and walks slowly towards the green-room.

"I think that fellow's had rather more than is good for him," says Lord Henry, audibly. "Fancy his wanting to prevent my coming to you. He stuck in my pathway like a block. We were very nearly having a row over it."

"Oh, he could not have understood. He would never have had the presumption," she murmurs.

"I am not so sure of that. He looked quite dangerous at one time. Do you know him?"

"Only to speak to; only a little. He's the leading tenor of the theatre."

"He's an awful cad, whoever he is; not a fit person for you to associate with. I hope you will not notice him any longer."

"Oh, why should I? We have no work together."

"I should hope not. And now, am I not to have the honour of seeing you safely home?"

"Certainly; but I must change my dress. Where is Fanny?"

She advances to the side as she speaks, and encounters Carrington leaning in a moody attitude against the scenes.

"Can I do anything for you?" he demands, seeing her look around, and starting into life at the mere sight of her.

But Stella is afraid to accept his services, for Lord Henry is close behind. She turns away without speaking.

"I wish I could find Miss Reed," she says to his lordship. "She ought not to be out of the way."

"But why need you change your dress? You look so beautiful as you are."

"It is so cumbersome. Besides, it would seem

strange to sit down to supper like this. I shall not be many minutes."

"And *my* minutes are so few," pleads Lord Henry. "Have you forgotten that I am bound to leave you to-morrow morning? I grudge even a few minutes. Be generous, and come home as you are."

"Oh, if *you* wish it, Lord Henry, of course I will."

"What could I wish for *more* than to keep you by my side?"

"Very well, then; we will start at once. I suppose the carriage is in waiting? Here is Fanny at last with my fur cloak. Fanny, I thought you were never coming."

"I only stayed behind to inquire after Mrs. Halsted's baby. It has had the croup."

"Bother the baby! And kept Lord Henry waiting."

"I am sorry," murmurs the meek Miss Reed; "but the child has been seriously ill. Are you not going to change, Stella?"

"No; Lord Henry prefers me as I am. Or, at least, he says so," replies Miss Beauchamp, with an arch look at her cavalier.

"How could I ever prefer you to what you *are*?" he answers. "Each character you appear in seems to me more enchanting than the last."

Amor Carrington, leaning against the side-scenes, sees and hears all this, and groans to himself.

She has forgotten him utterly. It is as though he had never been. Even now the party is moving off to seek her carriage, her hand resting on Lord Henry's arm; and though they pass within a few feet of where he stands, she does not even look up or nod him a farewell.

"Good-night, Mr. Amory—I mean Mr. Carrington; but I never can remember new-fangled names," says Miss Reed, as she gives him a nervous hand to shake. "How pale you are looking! I hope you are not ill."

"I'm all right," he answers, carelessly. "*She*," he continues—with a glance in the direction of Miss Beauchamp's vanishing figure—"seems to have forgotten who I am, or that she has ever seen me."

"Oh, you mustn't mind that, Mr. Carrington; indeed, you mustn't. It's just Stella's way. She's very strange at times, and quite incomprehensible; but it will be all right in the morning, see if it isn't."

"I didn't say anything was wrong, did I?"

"No; but I can read it in your face; and she is fickle—very. So take care of yourself, Mr. Amory, and whatever happens, don't get to think of her too much. You are not offended at my speaking to you so plainly, I hope?"

"By no means; but your caution is quite unnecessary, thank you all the same."

"I was afraid—I thought——" commences the kind-hearted creature.

"Fanny, Fanny! make haste; we're waiting."

"I must go, or she'll get into one of her tempers. She's all very well while the weather is fair, Mr. Carrington; but she cannot bear the least crossing. And you're sure you're not angry? For I like you, I can't tell why, and I should be so sorry if anything went wrong."

"You are very good. I am infinitely obliged to you; but you shall see that I can take care of myself," returns the young tenor, just as Miss Beauchamp's voice is again heard urging her poor beast of burden to make haste and convey her numerous wraps to the carriage.

As it drives away from the theatre, Amor Carrington prepares to go home. The Halsteds press him to take supper with them. Miss Bella Trotman intimates that it is her birthday, and her mamma would be so pleased to see Mr. Amory among the friends who are to assemble at her lodgings. Young Williams, who is almost as regular an attendant at the theatre as the man who opens the doors, links his arm in that of the tenor, and says, "Bother the women, old boy! Come and have stewed tripe and onions at the White Horse with me." But Carrington resists one and all of their invitations, and, declining any company but his own, buttons up his coat, slouches his hat over his eyes, and sets off for his own abode. He has to pass the hotel in order to reach it, and he dreads doing so;

but he thrusts his hands in his pockets and goes past it like a man, and no one but himself knows what he feels, nor of what he is thinking as he does so.

"I hope to goodness Amory isn't going to be ill," remarks Mrs. Halsted to her husband, as they trudge home together.

"Why, what on earth has put that into your head, Emma?"

"Well, he neither ate nor talked at dinner to-day. You observed yourself how silent he was, and as for this evening, he was so glum there was no getting a word out of him. Miss Reed observed the same thing exactly."

"Ha, ha! Poor Amory. What a state he'd have been in if he'd known you women were taking the length of his foot after that fashion! Why, my dear, depend upon it, it's nothing. A love quarrel, maybe. Little Trotman has been snubbing the young fellow, perhaps, and put him on his mettle to show her he don't care a rush about it."

"No; I don't think it's Bella Trotman," says Mrs. Halsted, sagely.

Women are so wonderfully "cute" in matters of the heart.

CHAPTER V.

In the Light again?

Two o'clock is the hour that has been fixed for the singing-lesson on the following day, but Amor Carrington does not go near the hotel. How can he tell but what Lord Henry Mecklington may have changed his mind, and be still hanging about Miss Beauchamp; or that she may choose to affect the same indifference towards him that she did the night before? He sits, during the hours that he expected to pass in her presence, with his arms upon the table, and his head upon his hands, thinking, not so much of her, as of how he wishes he had been born a gentleman, or that, having no chance of rising from the position in which he has been born, he had not been gifted with a talent that brings him in contact with people with whom he can never hope to associate.

He looks at his well-shaped hands and feet, his muscular limbs, his really handsome features, and wonders in *what* it can be he falls so short of the standard of excellence society demands from the candidates for her favour.

"I speak fair grammar," he thinks, despondingly, "and I write a good hand. I am always civil to women, and I am not afraid to discuss a subject if I have any knowledge of it. Yet I feel, when I get

amongst a lot of people, that I'm not quite the same as the others. I'm not at my ease, and I always wish I was at home again. Perhaps it's my clothes! I know I'm rather rough in my dress. Williams is always chaffing me about that; but then he's such a dandy, and I never did care about ties and gloves and all that sort of rubbish. Perhaps if I was to be a little more particular about such things, there wouldn't be so much difference between me and others. That man had on a tie no thicker than a piece of tape last night. I suppose they're the fashion, since he wears them. I wonder if they have any like it in the shops here."

He does not put his thoughts into so definite a shape as this, but they influence him nevertheless; for after awhile he strolls out, and entering the first haberdasher's, asks for the article in question. Mr. Briggs, of Leadstone, does not happen to have any of the ties in question in stock at that particular moment (what country shopman ever does?), but he shows Mr. Carington a lovely sailor's knot in sky-blue satin, which he assures him is "all the go" at present. And the tenor's untutored eye (for good taste is far more a matter of education than feeling), caught by the brilliant colour, makes him succumb to the persuasive tongue of Mr. Briggs, and he leaves the shop with the sky-blue tie in his pocket, and walks about the town aimlessly until it is time to go to a chop-house to

dine, and so on to the theatre to take his part in the nauseous operetta. As soon as it is over, he rushes out of the house to an adjoining tavern, and stays there until the moment arrives for his song—which he delivers worse than he has ever done before—thanks to the hot blood that is surging round his heart under the knowledge of Stella Beauchamp's vicinity.

When his song is concluded, he rises with the intention of going straight home; but Miss Beauchamp has observed his studied avoidance of her, and is determined to circumvent him.

She rushes off the stage almost before the curtain has descended, and catches him just as he is disappearing down the staircase.

"Mr. Carrington, I want to speak to you."

"I beg your pardon, madam."

"Don't be so formal. Come back here. I have something particular to say. Why did you not come to give me a singing-lesson this afternoon?"

"They are calling for you to go on, madam."

"Bother the call! I want an answer to my question."

"I have really forgotten what it was."

"Why did you not come to the hotel this afternoon?"

"I was otherwise engaged."

"But you had engaged yourself to me."

"I was not sure if you would remember the engagement."

"You might at least have called to inquire. Will you come to-morrow morning?"

"Madam, you had really better go on. We shall have the manager round here in a moment."

Miss Beauchamp stamps her foot with impatience.

"Will you come to-morrow morning or not?"

"As you give me the option, I would rather *not*."

"But why?"

"I have something very particular to do."

"Give it up. I wish you to come," imperiously.

It is a strong temptation, but Amor Carrington does not yield to it. On the contrary, his lip curls.

"I am sorry, madam, but it is impossible."

"But what reason can you have? Why are you so changed?" she commences, when they are interrupted by the voice of Mr. Halsted.

"Now, my dear lady, don't you hear the calls? They will have the house down in another minute. Mr. de Courcy is waiting to take you on."

And she is hurried away to perform the nightly ceremony; and when she emerges from the other side of the curtain, the tenor has vanished.

"Where is Mr. Carrington?" are the first words she utters as she leaves the stage.

"Gone 'ome, miss," says a scene-shifter.

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure, miss, 'cause he left a message with me for the governor."

"What can you want with that fellow?" demands De Courcy.

"What's that to you?" she answers, sharply, as she goes to her dressing-room.

But she is as determined that by hook or by crook she will make the tenor give up his real or imaginary engagements for the morrow, as though her mind were bent on the fulfilment of some lofty object in which the welfare of nations was concerned.

"That man shall come to me to-morrow morning," she says to herself, "or my name's not Stella Beauchamp."

She is so full of this idea, small as it may appear, and the best means of compassing it, that she makes anything but an agreeable companion for Miss Reed that evening. She is fractious and *distracte*; not quite sure if she will condescend to write to Carrington, and yet aware that by no other means than a note of apology for her conduct to him the evening before will she again lure him to her side. She had not thought he had sufficient spirit to resent her coolness by his own, and she is piqued into showing him that he cannot continue it longer than she gives him leave to do. She feels intuitively that, for all his *gaucherie* and bashful bearing, Amor Carrington is at heart a man, and that a course of *hauteur* will simply drive

him from her side for ever. She is not yet in a condition to confess even to herself that she likes him well enough to be sorry at such a contingency, but she loves to exert her power of attraction; and anything like indifference or defection on the part of a man who evidently admires her is sufficient to put her on her mettle to bring him to her feet again. She tries to decide on her best course of action as she eats her supper, but she can come to no satisfactory conclusion.

"Go to bed, Fanny," she says, authoritatively, as the meal is cleared away; "I have some letters to write, and wish to be undisturbed;" and her meek companion guesses too well what the effect of opposition would be not to obey.

As soon as she is unobserved, Stella Beauchamp brings out her pen and paper, and commences to write to Mr. Carrington. It is a difficult letter to compose; for if she makes her meaning *too* clear, Heaven only knows to what use he may not put her epistle—men *are* such brutes!—whilst on the other hand, if she does not write strongly enough, her written words may have no more effect upon him than had her tongue and eyes.

She writes the note four or five times over without pleasing herself. But at last it is allowed to stand as follows:—

"You have made me so unhappy!"

My readers will observe at this juncture what a powerful weapon in anger or pathos is the fact of commencing a letter without any prefix. The words which follow may be those of the sternest reproach or the deepest passion, but they are always intended to be killing. The utter absence of a name says so much. The heart is either too full or too empty to be able to transcribe it. The name is either too dear or too repugnant; the blank space has been filled up by a warm tear or a bitter sigh. Only people who are comfortably and legitimately entitled to love or hate each other commence with "My own beloved Charlie," or "My dear Charles." The pens of the uncertain and the *too* certain oftener refuse to move at all until the line is passed. And with women especially this omission means, one way or another, a great deal.

Stella Beauchamp intends it to mean more than it does when she so begins her letter to Amor Carington. She is so much a woman of the world, and he is so genuine and unsophisticated, that the battle between them is anything but a fair one.

"You have made me so unhappy! I thought our friendship was going to be such a pleasant thing; but I suppose I was mistaken, and I have no doubt you have plenty of friends, and will not miss me. Yet it seems hard I should lose the benefit of your instruction. Have I done anything to offend you? I had

such a terrible headache the night before last. What with being bored and disappointed, I was hardly fit to speak to you; but I thought our engagement was a settled thing, and stayed in on purpose this afternoon. However, I would not worry you for the world; so if it is really too much trouble to correct my bad singing, think no more about it; but I am not sure if I can promise to do the same. I feel quite silly when I think that our little *tête-à-têtes* are ended. I hope you will burn this letter. Good-bye."

As there was no beginning, so there is no ending to her effusion, and she writes it on paper without any distinctive mark. (I wonder does she keep a stock of similar paper on purpose for such occasions?) Anyway, it reaches Amor Carrington's hands by a private messenger, while she still slumbers on, the following morning. How does he receive it?

How would you receive such an epistle from the one whom in your heart you secretly adore, believing him or her to be the perfection of man or woman-kind, and too high for you to approach, save in your inmost thoughts? He hails it as a messenger from heaven. He cannot believe at first that it is intended for himself; but when he is convinced of the fact, he trembles from head to foot with his great joy.

"You have made me so unhappy!"

Is it possible that his absence or presence, his pleasure or his displeasure, can really have any effect

on the feelings of this angelic being? that in so short a space of time as they have been acquainted she can have conceived an interest for him anything akin to that which he knows now that he feels for her? The thought is overpowering. It makes him giddy, as though he were standing on the brink of some great precipice, as indeed he is.

"Bored and disappointed!" That was the very evening she spent with Lord Henry Mecklington. What can she have been bored with, except his lordship's company? What can have disappointed her, except his own absence? *Disappointed! Bored!* Blessed thought! She likes his presence, and has no real satisfaction in the meaningless attentions of his rival. Amor Carrington is nearly beside himself with exultation and delight. *"Too much trouble"* to correct her singing! When he could find no pleasure in heaven or earth equal to listening to her sweet voice! (It will be as well to say here, more for the sake of illustrating Mr. Carrington's passion than the story, that Miss Beauchamp's singing voice strongly resembles that of a hen canary with the pip.) As if anything he can ever do for her will be a trouble—his angel! his goddess! his one supreme idolatry!

Shall we enter more fully into the workings of this young man's spirit? I think not! A lover's ravings are much the same all the world over, and we have but to recall the time (perhaps not so very

distant either) when our hearts beat to a quick and irregular time, and our faces flushed, and our bodies trembled, and our hopes were bright, and we believed in a to-morrow. I daresay our thoughts at that period, if written down on paper, would not look much more sensible than poor Amor Carrington's; but there was no absurdity in them to us then, neither does he note anything peculiar in the transports which he utters. I am safe in saying, however, that he eats no breakfast that morning, and that he dresses himself at least three or four times before he feels the least confidence in his own appearance. But then, being attired in his very best, with the sky-blue satin necktie in full bloom and a flower in his button-hole, like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and a giant rejoicing to run his course, he sets off for the hotel.

Miss Beauchamp, enveloped in blue draperies and languidly reposing on the sofa, is waiting to receive him alone.

She does not speak until the waiter has closed the door upon them, and then she shakes her head reproachfully and says:

"Well, sir, and what have you got to say for yourself?"

It is a clever *ruse*, but it is a woman's art all over. By a feigned repentance she has "lured her tassel gentle back again," and now that he stands before her she

turns the tables, and to avoid the possibility of anything like a reproach, opens the ball with the inferred expectation of an apology from him.

Carrington remains in the centre of the room, silent and motionless.

"Are you not very much ashamed of your bad temper? Haven't you been a very foolish fellow? Now, confess."

"I was a fool indeed to do anything that should excite your offence or keep me from you," he murmurs in reply.

"Oh, we mustn't talk about offence; there is no such word, I hope, between you and me; and as for the rest, least said soonest mended. For here we are, you see, together again, and we shall know better next time, shan't we?"

"How can I ever thank you for your letter?" he commences.

"Oh, that stupid production! I hope to goodness you haven't kept it; it may be full of all kinds of dreadful things."

"It is full of the most angelic sweetness. You *must* let me keep it, won't you?"

"Not for a moment. I don't even remember what I said in it; for I wrote it in a hurry last night when my head was all in a whirl from——"

"From what?" he asks expectantly.

"Well, from crying, if you must be told; though

why on earth I should have cried, Heaven only knows! Now don't fall on my hand in that way; I cannot allow it; really I can't. If you won't be good and sit quietly in your chair, you will make me run away from you."

"Anything but that."

"Very well then, behave yourself properly, and mind what I say. And so you were jealous, were you?"

"Who would *not* have been jealous to see the airs that aristocrat took upon himself, and the way in which he monopolised you?"

"You silly child! What did the poor man do or say?"

"He ran after you everywhere, and wouldn't let another soul come near you."

"Well, and wouldn't you have done the same?"

"Of course I should; but I thought you seemed as though you liked it."

"Oh, you men! what plagues you are! Would you have had me snub Lord Henry? You must remember he is one of the most influential patrons of the drama. He has a share in the Empress's, where I hope to get an engagement this season, and it might seriously injure my prospects if I were to offend him. These things are quite necessary in the profession, you know."

"I suppose they are," with a sigh.

"And we poor actresses are constantly obliged to hide our real feelings, in order to keep in with patrons and managers."

"How I wish I was a grandee of some sort, and able to command such attention!"

"Now you're silly. Which is better, to dance attendance on me backwards and forwards to a theatre, or to sit *as we are sitting now?*"

And as Miss Beauchamp puts the question she places one white hand on the young man's knee; in a moment he has seized and carried it to his lips.

"This—this—a thousand times!" he exclaims, kissing it passionately.

"Upon my word, Mr. Carrington, I think you must be fancying you *are* a patron of the drama. I wonder how many gentlemen beside yourself would dare to take such a liberty with me as that!"

"Ah, but every one has not received such a letter from you as I had this morning. Tell me, Miss Beauchamp, that it is the truth: that I am not only one amongst the many."

"How can you think so for a moment? What can you think of me to ask the question?" she answers with downcast eyes.

"I think you are the most beautiful, the most charming, and the sweetest woman that I have ever seen." And as Amor Carrington speaks, he throws himself upon the ground before her.

CHAPTER VI.

A Burning Heart.

THESE extremely shy men, when they are once set on horseback, gallop to the devil faster than the boldest fellow that ever winked at a woman. Amor Carrington is by nature modest and retiring; but that very fact causes him to attach a stronger meaning to the words and actions of others. What he would not have done, he does not suspect them of doing; what he would not have said (without meaning it), he does not realise that they may incontinently speak; and hope once lighted in his heart, therefore, is up and in a blaze before the foolish woman who has thoughtlessly applied the match to his fiery nature can credit it is ignited; and like many another careless incendiary, she is half frightened to see the conflagration she has raised. The young man has cast himself upon his knees before the sofa on which she reclines; he has firm hold of the hand which she permitted him to clasp; his eyes, full of passionate feeling, are fixed upon her face. Stella Beauchamp knows as well as we do that if this affair is to go further the time has more than arrived to declare it; yet she has not the courage to repulse him. She does not care for him; she sees all his faults of ill-breeding; she knows that in society she should be ashamed even to acknow-

ledge him as an admirer; and yet she lets him kneel there and adore her, and feels the blood mount to her face under the pleasurable emotion of being gazed at and worshipped as a superior being. It is so delightful, I may go further and say that it is so *necessary*, to some women *to be loved*, that they would accept the attentions of a Caliban sooner than go without the incense of flattery, on which they exist. And Amor Carrington is by no means an ill-favoured lover; as he kneels by her side now he looks exceedingly handsome, and Miss Beauchamp sees it, and she does like him a little, just a very little, and is vexed that he should have been wounded by her previous neglect.

"But you mustn't stay there," she urges.

"Why not? There is no one to see us!"

"Some one may come in. I expect old Reed back every minute; do get up, Mr. Carrington."

"Let me remain here just one moment more. Imagine what it must be for me to look into your eyes and think——"

"What?"

"You will not say I am too presumptuous—that you like me just the least bit in the world. Do you? Is it true?"

"Well, if *the least bit in the world* will satisfy you, I do."

"It will not satisfy me. I shall want all—everything—"

"Oh, hush, pray, for Heaven's sake!" cries Miss Beauchamp, really alarmed at his vehemence; "you mustn't speak to me like that, or you will make me angry."

"I will be dumb for ever if you bid me; I will do anything in the world to please you."

"Will you? I am going to put you to the test. Get up, Mr. Carrington, and sit on that chair, and talk sensibly if you can."

"*Must I?*"

"Yes, you must. I won't say another word until you do." He rises at once, and disposes himself as she desires. She cannot find fault with his obedience, yet a little more resistance to her authority would not have been displeasing to her.

"And now I wonder if you will keep your promise, and do me another favour," she says bewitchingly.

"Only try me."

"It is not a great thing, but I daresay you will object to it; it is something I want you to alter."

"Don't be afraid of telling me; I am not at all conceited."

"I want you to leave off wearing those atrocious ties."

Notwithstanding his assertion, he colours. It is so difficult to hear animadversion on our personal

taste with equanimity; and he had thought the sky-blue satin becoming.

"Are they wrong?" he says ingenuously.

"Wrong! they are altogether dreadful. Gentlemen never wear anything in London now but black, or the very saddest colours; a light tie is my aversion. You won't be angry with me, will you?"

"How could I be angry with you? But dark colours are so gloomy."

"They are fashionable, and I *want* you to look fashionable; it makes such a difference."

"I will never wear another blue tie as long as I live," says poor Carrington, looking rather regretfully, nevertheless, at the glistening satin that covers his shirt-front.

"That's right; nor a crimson one. The red tie you had on the first evening we met set my teeth on edge."

"But we all wear them; it's quite a mark of the profession up here."

"Heavens! don't speak to me like that. The profession is the very thing you should try to lose all mark of. That reminds me of another thing—your hair: I wish you'd cut it off."

"Cut off my hair!" says Carrington, as he claps his hand to the offending locks. "But it is almost necessary; how should I play boys' parts without it?"

"Wear a wig. Why should you go about an object

all your days—well, not an object, but still different from other gentlemen—just to spare your manager the expense of providing you with the proper stage accessories?”

“But I am not a gentleman, Miss Beauchamp; I have told you that already; I am not in the position of your other friends.”

“Not at present,” she says, laughing; “I acknowledge that, Mr. Carrington. None of my other friends are sitting half so close to me, nor—”

“Nor what?” he whispers, as he leans forward, eagerly.

“Nor am I taking so much interest in their hairs and neckties,” she answers, as she lifts one dark lock in her fingers, and pushes it off his forehead,

The caressing action emboldens him to exclaim, “Stella!”

But this is going *too* far—at least for to-day; so Miss Beauchamp, rising from the sofa, proposes an adjournment to the piano, and a lengthy but much interrupted singing-lesson ensues.

* * * * *

Stella Beauchamp has won the bet she laid with herself, and brought Amor Carrington to her feet again. But she has to pay for the victory. During the few days that follow the interview of reconciliation she finds out that the young man's character is more determined than she bargained for. Had she

not encouraged him to make love to her, he would never have found the effrontery to commence; but having once got the bit in his teeth, she finds the young tenor too ardent and impulsive a wooer to be easily disposed of. He will not give up one inch of his rights, and he seems to obtain a fresh right every day. She admires his boldness and his warmth, whilst it almost frightens her to think how she shall ever disentangle herself from its effects; and all her time is now spent in trying to put out, or at all events to keep down, the bonfire she has raised. But her rebuffs are too gentle for Amor Carrington to take alarm or offence at. She is the first woman he has ever loved, and his whole soul has gone forth to meet her; and his idea of a woman's modesty is so great, it seems but natural to him that she should retire and he pursue. It is not at all uncommon to find such old, pure, chivalrous ideas maintained by men who, not having frittered away their youth in a dozen aimless passions, conceive at last an honest and enduring affection, and judge of its quality on both sides by what they have read, and not by what they have endured. His Leadstone friends and acquaintances are astonished at the change in the tenor's demeanour and appearance. He has always been cheerful, but now he is madly gay. Instead of his dress keeping pace with the bright colouring of his thoughts, he appears in the sombrest of ties and that essence of propriety, a tall hat. The

Halsteds consider it a thousand pities he should have taken it into his head to be shorn of his flowing locks; indeed, the manager is almost disposed to make it into a grievance that can only be remedied by a pecuniary consideration.

"For it is self-evident, my dear," as Mrs. Halsted confides to Fanny Reed (she has left off attempting to confide with anything like success to her quondam bosom friend; Miss Beauchamp), "if young Amory wilfully goes and cuts all the hair off his head, that George must provide him with a long wig for the operetta; and the trouble and expense we have been put to already is past telling. And why should he have done it? He had beautiful hair, with a natural curl in it that only required a brush and cold water to make it into ringlets; and he goes and puts us to all this bother for nothing. Not but what the fair wig becomes him, I must say that. Mrs. Liddiard declared she was quite startled yesterday, he looked so handsome in it."

"I think Mr. Carrington is a very well-favoured young man at all times," remarks the demure Fanny.

"Ah, there again! what made him change his name? He has been known amongst our company as James Amory for the last two years; and now he has even taken to sign his letters by this new-fangled title of Amor Carrington. Mr. Halsted is quite vexed about it; he never thought him fickle before."

"I am afraid Stella is at the bottom of that," says Miss Reed. She knows Stella is at the bottom of it all, but she is too faithful a friend to disclose her secrets before there is any need.

"I wish she hadn't put such nonsense into his head. And he is grown so extravagant in his dress too! did you see the gray gloves he had on to-day? Nothing seems good enough for him now. Why, only yesterday I had bought the most elegant waistcoat for George's evening wear (Mr. Lutton said he hadn't had such a piece of brocade in his shop for years; I'll show it you, dear, as soon as George comes home, and you shall judge for yourself), and Amory actually laughed at it, and called it 'loud.' I could have cried with vexation, for I've always been considered so particular in my taste; and Amory has been so much amongst us I should have thought he would have bitten out his tongue before he'd have said such a thing to me. But he's quite changed from what he used to be."

"He'll change back again, maybe, by-and-bye," says Miss Reed consolingly.

"Well, that remains to be proved, my dear, and in any case I don't much care for weathercocks. And it will take months before his hair grows to the length it was. I call him a perfect fright now, and not a bit like a professional. But if you will believe me, he turned round on Mr. Halsted when he said some-

thing of the sort the other day, and asked him if he thought he wanted to be pointed out as 'a d—d tenor' all his life. Such language! And Amory used to be the last person to show temper. I can't think what's come over him."

Miss Reed can think very well; but she keeps her thoughts to herself, for there are but a few days more to run before they leave Leadstone, and she sincerely hopes then, for the young man's own sake, that they shall have seen the last of Mr. Amor Carrington.

Stella Beauchamp sometimes hopes the same hope, and experiences a very disagreeable sensation of coldness and disappointment after it. I am not depicting a bad-hearted young woman. She is vain and frivolous and pleasure-seeking; but how many of our dear friends should we not cut, did we weed from amongst them those with the same tendencies? My heroine has been used to flattery ever since she can remember. To live without it, for her, is simply to exist. She would accept it at the hands of the man she disliked most in the world, but in that case she would not permit it to go farther than flattery. But she has no dislike for the young singer. On the contrary, there is much she admires in him, and more than once she has been startled by finding her heart beat faster at his approach. She has been very angry with her heart on these occasions, and called herself a fool and other hard names, and trusted most sincerely—yet with a

general idea that she has begun to trust too late—that she has not been so weak as to permit *the creature* to become necessary to her. At the same time, had Mr. Halsted offered to renew her engagement with him for another fortnight, it is more than probable that Miss Stella Beauchamp, by hook or by crook, would have slipped out of that which she has half made with another provincial manager for eight days before she returns to London. But the offer does not come, and the days pass on, and in a couple more she will have left that part of the country altogether.

Carrington's spirits decrease as the moment for his goddess's departure draws nearer; so do Miss Beauchamp's, though she does not let any one know it but herself.

"Last night but one of the engagement of the great London actress, Miss Stella Beauchamp," has been placarded with due effect throughout the town, and the curtain has descended on the usual success. But Miss Reed is not in attendance this evening on the movements of the actress.

"Fanny has such a dreadful cold I made her go to bed," says Miss Beauchamp in explanation to Mrs. Halsted. "She must get rid of it, if possible, or she won't be fit for travelling. Oh, I shall get on very well, thank you. Mr. Carrington has been kind enough to offer to see me home."

And accordingly Miss Beauchamp and Mr. Carrington enter the brougham together.

"What a lovely night!" says Stella, as they leave the theatre. "Quite like summer. How I should like a drive!"

"And should not I?" replies her companion; "is it impossible?"

"I don't see why it should be so. Fanny will swear it is improper, but she says that of everything. Tell the coachman to drive a little way out into the country, Mr. Carrington. Say a mile and back again. It will be so charming to talk in the moonlight!"

And Carrington, nothing loth, delivers the order, and sinks back on the cushions by her side.

"Isn't this delightful?" exclaims the girl, as they are carried along beneath the star-spangled sky. "How clear and bright the moon is, and how soft the air! Are you enjoying yourself, Mr. Carrington?"

"Too much, I fear," he answers.

"Why too much?"

"Because it will be so soon over. And then one night more, and you will be gone from Leadstone! *How am I to live my life without you?*"

She does not answer. She is thinking whether her own life will not appear a little duller—just at first—when they are separated.

"We shall meet again, Mr. Carrington," she says softly.

"Do not say Mr. Carrington. Let me hear your voice call me, if only once, by my Christian name."

"We are sure to meet again, *Amor*."

"Stella—dearest!" he says imploringly.

She feels him take her hand, she feels his arm steal round her waist, she feels him draw her to him, she feels his face bending down to hers, his lips coming nearer and nearer to her own,—she feels all this, and yet she does nothing to prevent the catastrophe which she knows must follow. On the contrary, for the first time in her life, perhaps, Stella Beauchamp yields to a natural impulse, and, laying her fair head down on the broad chest ready to receive it, lifts her face to meet Amor Carrington's kiss half-way.

"My love! my darling!" he says earnestly, as soon as he can speak.

"*Amor!*" is all she whispers in reply; and then she sighs deeply, and wishes, even in the midst of her pleasure, that she could be content to pass all her days with a heart that loves her so completely, and in these strong arms that would defend her against the world.

"I cannot let you sigh—not now!" says Carrington.

"I am sighing with content," she answers.

"Are you quite contented, darling? Could you be quite content with me?"

"Yes, if a drive could last for ever. But Fanny would certainly call this improper."

"Never mind Fanny. Let us think only of ourselves. You have taken all the sting out of our separation. I shall know now that wherever you are you love me."

"I shall never forget you," she answers cautiously.

"How like a dream this happy fortnight will seem to me! But it will come over again, Stella. Tell me it will come over again."

"O Amor, I hope it will; but who can answer in our profession—we who are here to-day and gone to-morrow? But you will come to London," she continues, not half believing, nor half hoping—even at that moment—that he will.

"I shall try for it, my dearest. I shall strain every nerve to get there now. London will be the centre of all my hopes whilst it contains you. Stella, do you really like me?"

"I do like you, Amor, very—very much!"

"What made you like me? What is there in me for any one to like, far less for such a creature as yourself? What is it you like in me, Stella?"

"I don't know."

"I have no birth, or manners, or appearance to

take your fancy. Nothing but this wretched voice, and a great love for you. How is it that it happened?"

"I don't know, but—I like you, Amor!"

And it is the truth. She does like him. She likes to sit by his side, clasped tight in his arms, and to hear him say how much he loves her; though she is dreading the while lest he should make any allusion to the prospect of marriage, however far distant, for here her liking ends. She could not—so she tells herself—marry him!

But Carrington does not broach the subject. In the first place, he is too happy in the present even to dream of a future; in the second, he has no idea but that a love like theirs—acknowledged and returned—must end in marriage. If he considers at all, he considers it a settled thing. He adores this woman, and she confesses she likes him. What should they do it for unless they mean to marry one another? Not just yet, of course; he has his name to make, and she must follow her profession; but work will be twice as easy with the support of mutual affection; and some day—at some blessed future time—he shall make Stella Beauchamp his wife.

This is the upshot of young Carrington's pure and honest dream. The upshot of hers is that she wishes to goodness she could, but she knows in her inmost soul she never will.

Still they drive on together under the star-spangled sky, heart to heart, whilst he tells her she is his star, and the light of his existence, and every other pretty thing that he can think of; and she just honest enough not to cap his vows by any similar assertions, yet lets him press and caress her, and has not the moral courage to say nay.

They reach the hotel long after they intended to do so, and find Miss Reed out of bed again in her alarm at Stella's absence, and urgent to know where they have been and what they have been doing. Miss Beauchamp blushes crimson in the gaslight under her friend's searching questions, and looks more beautiful in the eyes of her enraptured lover than she has ever done before. He leaves her almost immediately, but the expression of his eyes, as he bids her good night, is too significant to escape the lynx-like observation of Miss Reed.

"You've been fooling that young man worse than ever, Stella," she exclaims curtly, as soon as they are alone; "it is cruel of you; and when you know you don't care two straws about him, I wonder you can reconcile it to your conscience."

"Goodness me! What a fuss about a drive by moonlight! Am I to be deprived of fresh air when I want it, just because you happen to be stuffed up with a cold? You know I've often driven to Richmond

and back after the theatre. Nothing makes me sleep like a drive in the night air."

"I hope it will make Mr. Amory sleep also," remarks her duenna, dryly.

"I wish you'd call the man by his proper name," exclaims her companion.

"Amory is his proper name, and the Halsteds are very much annoyed at your having advised him to change it."

"What do I care for the Halsteds? And as for driving with Mr. Carrington, I shall drive with him again to-morrow night if I feel so disposed."

And she does drive with him on the following night, and fills the cup of his intoxication to the very brim.

"You will write to me, darling," he says on that occasion; "you will let me know all that happens to you, wont you? My only comfort will be to receive your letters."

Miss Beauchamp is rather dubious about giving this promise. Correspondence with an ardent and infatuated lover, who fully believes you intend to marry him, when you mean to do nothing of the sort, is not only inconvenient, but extremely compromising.

"I am a very bad hand at writing," she says in answer, "and I have very little time; but I shall send

you a newspaper whenever I can, that you may see how I am getting on."

"A newspaper! But I can buy that for myself. Oh, you will write to me sometimes, darling; only a line or two! I won't be greedy; but just to say you are thinking of me, and love me still."

"Sha'n't you know that without my telling you, Amor?"

"I hope so, love. But I shall like to hear it all the same. I shall write to you every day—if I may, Stella?"

"You will soon get tired of that," she laughs.

"Never!—until you are tired of reading my letters."

And so, indeed, he means, and in the fervour of his love is ready to believe and trust in her until the end. So that he does not look very miserable even when they part at the railway station on the following day, and he goes back to his now dull round of work at the Leadstone Theatre, and she to achieve new successes at the other end of England; for he judges her affection, and probity, and sense of honour by his own, and thoroughly believes the hand he holds in parting is as assuredly in his possession as though it were already encircled by his wedding-ring. So he sends her on her journey with a heartfelt blessing, and she feels really miserable when she has seen the last of the green-gray eyes fixed so lovingly upon her

face. But not a word of marriage has been said between them.

CHAPTER VII.

They Meet again.

It is July, and the London season is at its height. Miss Stella Beauchamp having completed her provincial engagements, and made a most successful appearance as the heroine of Dick Corrigan's new comedy-drama, *Husbands in Harness*, now running nightly at the Empress Theatre, is in high feather, and thinks more of herself each day. Nor are the public backward to assist her good opinion. Chetwynd Lawley, who bears the reputation of being the most captious critic about town, has openly expressed his belief that Stella Beauchamp is "the coming woman" and that he knew that there was "stuff" in her from the first moment he saw her put her foot upon the boards; and Anstey Collier (whose own daughter plays under the name of Celia Maréchale) has written a long article on *Husbands in Harness* in the *Piccadilly Review*, in which he maintains that the success of the piece should be laid at the feet of the leading lady, and that an actress combining so much pathos and humour has not been seen on the English stage since the days of Peg Woffington.

So that Miss Beauchamp, never slow to swallow

flattery, has really some reason for pluming herself on this occasion, and is not rendered more unpleasant by the dose than it is in the nature of a woman to be. For, added to the primal glory of having succeeded in her art, and been appreciated for her success, she has another and a secret triumph, which she believes will before long be made as public as the first. Lord Henry Mecklington, who has invested several thousands in a share of the lesseeship of the Empress Theatre, and made it an express stipulation in his contract that Miss Beauchamp shall have the option of appearing there for six months in the year, has paid her such close and unremitting attention during the season that their intimacy is in everybody's mouth. He not only attends her to and from the theatre nightly, but is to be seen (that is, were any less favoured visitor admitted at the same time, he might be seen) lounging on the sofa in her little sitting-room almost every afternoon. And although Stella Beauchamp is too worldly-wise to permit his lordship to provide her with anything but articles of *luxe* such as might be presented to any lady, the flowers and books and ornaments that adorn her apartments, no less than many of the costly jewels that bedeck her person, have been given to her in his name, and she has accepted them from him with all the *sangfroid* that portends legality. And here, knowing that this story will meet the eyes of a class who

may through ignorance misinterpret my heroine's character or designs, I stop to make the unvarnished statement that Stella Beauchamp is as virtuous a woman as is to be found within the boundaries of England. She is "wide-awake," if such a term may be used without offence, because she has been thrown on the world and her own resources since childhood, and she could hardly escape being either "wide-awake" or a fool. But she would be as ready to resent any real or apparent insult offered to her by a man, even were he the king himself, as the highest duchess in the land. Even more so, perhaps; for the duchess has not her bread depending in a great measure on her reputation (and we all know how cheaply some duchesses have held the latter trumpery possession), and Stella Beauchamp holds her fortune wrapped up in hers. She has been on the stage now for several years; and though she has committed a good many follies, and carried on many a flirtation, no one has ever dared to breathe a word against her character, and she does not believe any one ever will. She says that she would like to hear them do it. The fact is, she is too proud to think it possible. Fanny Reed may inveigh in her dull prosy manner against the impropriety of Lord Henry presenting her with an emerald and diamond locket, or an enamelled bracelet set with pearls (and Fanny, to do her justice, never loses an opportunity of rousing Stella's temper

by her shrugging shoulders or her pursed-up mouth); but, after all, what are his presents but "feelers" as to her disposition towards him? Sooner or later the man intends to propose to her—there cannot be the least doubt about that—and it is not likely he would risk a refusal. To spread the report that he had been jilted by an actress would be to make Lord Henry Mecklington the laugh of all the clubs. "And it is not as though he were plain Tom Jones or Dick Robinson, remember, my dear," Stella adds, when talking over this subject with her confidante. "I am sure no one thinks less of a title than I do, but *something* is due to the creature's rank, after all."

"And do you really believe, then, that he intends to marry you?" demands Miss Reed plaintively.

"*Intends to marry me!*" echoes Miss Beauchamp with wide-open eyes; "what are you dreaming of? If you had asked if I really intend to marry *him*, it would be more to the purpose! Why, what do you suppose all his presents are for? And why should he call night after night, to accompany me to the theatre? Do you take him for a fool, or me either? But there, it's no use talking to you; you've never gone through this kind of thing, so how should you have learned better? But rest assured, my dear, that even Lord Henry Mecklington knows me too well not to interpret my reception of his attentions in the proper manner."

"Which means, I suppose, that you *will* marry him."

"Well, I'm not quite sure—but I *think* I shall. He's certainly no beauty, and he's horribly old——"

Here Stella stops for a moment, and sighs gently, though she would find it difficult to explain what she sighs for.

"But it's better to be an 'old man's darling,' they say, 'than a young man's slave;' and though I am the last woman in the world to care about a title, there is no doubt 'Lady Henry Mecklington' would not look so bad upon a visiting-card."

"I believe the title is all you think about," says Fanny.

"Gracious me, Fanny, what queer ideas you do get into your head! The *title*! Why, I'd rather be Stella Beauchamp than any duchess you can name. But the man has money and position, and one must get married some day, I suppose—it's the penalty of being a woman. Heigh-ho!"

Miss Beauchamp speaks confidently, and believes what she says; but, like many another, she only deceives herself. It has been observed before, in the course of this narrative, that women are like moths round a candle where a title is concerned, and it is true. What is the especial attraction to them in rank, apart from brain and muscle, they cannot explain perhaps, even to themselves; yet they will take some

decrepit old creature with toothless gums and unsavoury breath, or some little, apish, idiotic mannikin, to their fair bosoms without a murmur, just because the one may happen by chance of birth to be an unsavoury duke, or the other an idiotic earl; whilst youth and vigour and a warm true heart may walk through life alone, or only attract their notice to be deceived and fooled and trifled with, and left to curse the day he ever stepped aside from the direct line of duty to answer their siren call. He is a happy man who contrives to pass through this world, amusing himself with these fair, foolish, fickle playmates as much as may be, but entangling himself with none. For though there are few men whose characters will stand the cruel test of marriage and enforced companionship, the woman who can do so, who can live night and day with a husband for any lengthened period, and not wear down his once feverish passion to a tame endurance, is more than a woman—a great deal more, at least, than the ordinary woman. She must be a species of hybrid: half mortal, half divine; half angel, half devil: for whilst we tarry in this wicked world the most immaculate purity will pall without it has a spice of naughtiness mixed with it; and of all dull and uninteresting nonentities, give a man what is technically defined a “good woman.” She is excellent as a sister, she cannot be surpassed as a mother; and no one, were he the greatest Don Juan going, would

wish to have anything else for a grandmother. After twenty years' marriage perhaps she is respectable and safe as a wife, but she doesn't do to begin the world with. She is so cruelly slow! Slow to anger, maybe; decidedly slow of belief (especially of anything wrong); slow to be jealous, or frivolous, or forgetful; but, with all this immaculate slowness, oh, so slow to love and so quick to be shocked! She is an admirable invention to keep at home to look after your household affairs (and that is, it appears, what most men marry for nowadays; at all events there are few who let their domestic relations interfere with their public pleasures), but she is a terrible burden to carry wherever you go. And as this homily commenced, so let it end. He is a happy man who contrives to pass through the world amusing himself with all, but entangling himself with none. The sentiment may not sound moral, but in reality it is far more so than the conduct of half the husbands of the present day. And perhaps it is this very fact which, reacting on the minds of women (for though few wives may make their wrongs public, there are fewer still that can resist the temptation of confiding them to the sympathising ears of their female friends), makes them consider no marriage a gain except as it raises them in the social scale.

Miss Stella Beauchamp is certainly of this opinion. She has seen too much of imprudent marriages amongst her acquaintances ever to contemplate selling herself

for anything but money or position. She shudders at the idea of struggling upwards in company with a husband who gains a stone yearly, and half a dozen gawky children to make her look old before her time. She does not anticipate happiness in the married state under any circumstances; but if she is to be contented even, she must be rich and powerful. Else she prefers to remain Stella Beauchamp, and work hard to retain the hold she has acquired over the public, and deserve the undoubted popularity she has won. At least so she says—and thinks she means. Miss Reed does not offer any further opposition to her friend's assertion. She only remarks in a kind of vague and wondering manner that it is not actually "necessary" to be married, and that she had always thought Stella rather despised the condition than otherwise.

"At least, I am sure you used to sneer enough at poor Emma and her children at Leadstone. Don't you remember the day we dined there with young Mr. Amory, and you said that——"

But at this allusion Miss Beauchamp's face flares crimson.

"I wish to goodness you wouldn't talk of that hateful place. I've told you again and again I don't care even to think of it. I never spent such a horrid time in all my life."

"Well, I'm sure you had enough flattery to please

any one. I thought you quite enjoyed it," continued Miss Reed, with a cunning upward glance.

"Well, then, you thought wrong. I was as dull as ditch-water the whole time. However, it's over now, and I'm never going there again, so it's no use either talking or thinking about it."

"Have you heard from Mr. Amory lately?" demands her companion hesitatingly.

"No! *I have not heard from Mr. Amory lately!*" cries Stella, imitating her tone. "Is there any other question you would like to put upon the subject? You are so inquisitive about that young man, Fanny, that I believe you're in love with him yourself. If so, you can take up the correspondence, for I've dropped it."

"Are you never going to write to the poor fellow again, then?" says Miss Reed in dismay.

"I am not. The 'poor fellow,' as you so pathetically call him, is quite agreeable to the idea. I am not sure that he is not glad of it. I have explained to him that it is neither possible nor right that I should correspond with a young unmarried man like himself."

"And what did he say?"

"I have not heard from him since."

"How long was it ago?"

"How curious you are! Three weeks."

"Poor fellow!" repeats Miss Reed with a sigh.

"Oh! don't go on 'poor fellowing' the man in that

absurd fashion. Go and console him yourself, if you think he requires it. I have only done what is right. What do you suppose Lord Henry would say if he heard that I allowed Carrington to write to me? It might ruin my prospects."

"Well, it's no more than I expected of you."

"Very good; then you are proved to have been in the right for once in your life, which must be a great comfort to you. And now, if you would kindly remove yourself and your belongings to another apartment, it would be a great comfort to me; for the afternoon is exceedingly hot, and I want to lie down and rest before dinner." And Stella stretches herself indolently on the sofa as she concludes.

Miss Reed begins to collect her working materials without comment.

"Will you be denied if anybody calls?" she demands humbly before leaving.

"No; but tell Maria to be sure and bring the name up to me first. I can't see every one. And now go, and don't bother."

Fanny disappears, and Stella places herself in a comfortable position, with Rhoda Broughton's last novel in her hand. She does not want to sleep; she wants to distract her attention, and to dissipate the unpleasant impression left by her companion's last remarks. She sighs deeply as she opens the book, and she tries to read and revive her interest in the

story; but in a few minutes the volume has slid upon her lap, and her hands are folded above it, whilst her eyes run listlessly about the apartment. It is a pretty little room, one of a set of four rented in her name in a thoroughfare running out of Regent Street. It is commodiously and elegantly furnished, but not too much so, for every article has been paid for out of her own hardly-gained earnings.

And, as a rule, no man or woman, in whatever profession, who lives purely and honestly on the proceeds of his or her brain, can afford to live luxuriously. The brain is the highest gift that God has given us, and its efforts are generally the least well paid.

Miss Beauchamp's drawing-room—it is more like a boudoir than a drawing-room—taken altogether, has a very pretty effect; but when dissected, there is not much of value in it. Blue-and-white cretonne on the chairs and couches, lace curtains shading the windows, a few books, a few flowers, a cottage-piano, and a stand of ferns—these constitute almost all its furniture. The clock and candelabra, which were presented to her by Barry Logan, after she had made the success of his great burlesque *Olympus*, stand on the mantelpiece: in one corner of the room is her own bust in marble, the gift of an enthusiastic manager; whilst her full-length portrait in oils, taken in the character of Haidée, adorns the opposite side of the wall. With these exceptions there is nothing to distinguish Stella

Beauchamp's room from that of any other lady—nor, as she reclines on her blue-and-white couch, is there anything to distinguish her from the rest of woman-kind, except her beauty and her grace.

She looks round the apartment, unconscious of its merits or demerits. Fanny Reed's unwelcome allusions to Leadstone have carried her thoughts far away from her surroundings, and there is something which, did Stella Beauchamp own to the possession of a conscience, might be called very like remorse, making itself felt in her breast at the remembrance. She will not acknowledge to herself that she regrets Amor Carrington, but she knows that she has a very uncomfortable sensation whenever she thinks of him, and the length to which she encouraged him to go.

She tries, therefore, to put the thought away whenever it recurs; but it has acquired an obstinate habit of recurring. Especially does it worry her when in the company of Lord Henry Mecklington, and whilst receiving his lover-like attentions. It is utterly absurd—so she says to herself—that a pair of eyes should haunt a woman; and in her own mind she is quite ready to ascribe the circumstance to bile, or something equally romantic; but it is a fact that the last longing look Amor Carrington fixed on her face as the train carried her past him on the Leadstone platform returns to her at all sorts of odd moments, and generally when she is most anxious to forget all about him.

She sees those green-gray eyes fixed on her from the drawing-room wall even now, and she shuts her own to avoid them. It is three months and more since she left Leadstone, and she has not seen Mr. Carrington since. At first his frequent letters pleased her. They were so frankly and ardently written; they expressed so freely and yet modestly his feelings towards her, and his conviction of her truth and honesty, that she could not help admiring the nobility of the young man's character, and feeling secretly proud of having excited his admiration and his love. But when she came to London, and found Lord Henry so eager to meet her and do her honour, the fervent expression of Carrington's attachment became not only a reproach, but dangerous. What might she not lose by carrying the game too far? She liked to receive his letters—I believe she had even on occasions raised them to her lips—but what good could the young tenor's love ever do her, and what harm might it not effect?

She grew afraid of receiving them, and, what is more to her credit, she grew ashamed of answering them. Her correspondence with him had never gained the pitch of warmth. She was too cautious, even though her heart *had* been a little touched, to commit herself on paper; but now she felt that even her lukewarm replies must cease. She had made up her mind to marry Lord Henry, and however worldly-

mindful and ambitious and cruelly careless she might be, she was too much of a woman to carry on a double game to gratify her vanity. The tender passages she had been betrayed into with Amor Carrington at Leadstone had really been heart-prompted. She had felt sure that she could never marry him, but only because he had neither money nor position, not on account of himself. On the contrary, her heart had often sighed, "Oh, that Heaven had made me such a man, with all things added to him that are necessary for my happiness!" But that was as unlikely as that she should think of marrying him without, and therefore she had accepted Lord Henry as an admirer and possible husband, and with that acceptance the thought of Amor Carrington had become a miserable reproach to her. She felt she *must* disabuse his mind of the hope she had permitted it to cherish, but she could not do it all at once. She must let him down by degrees. And the first step she had taken was silence. She had let his letters go unanswered till he inquired the cause, and then she said she had been too busy, and had no time for correspondence. And when his answers had reached a pitch of despair, and he had reminded her of all that had passed between them, and implored her to explain the reason of the change, she had sent him a curt reply to the effect she had told Miss Reed that in her position the greatest care was needful, and for

the sake of her reputation she could not keep up a correspondence with a young unmarried man. And she has received no answer to that letter, and the remembrance of it sits on her soul like lead. What did he do when he received it? How does he feel it now? What can he think of her?

She is roused from the reverie into which she has fallen by a knock at the hall door. She does not take much notice of it: there are other people residing in the house—the visitor may be for the under floor, or the upper. So motionless is she that she does not even unclasp the hands which are tightly knit together, nor remove her eyes from the opposite wall. But in a few seconds Maria enters.

“If you please, miss, there’s a gentleman wants to see you.”

“What’s his name?”

“He didn’t give no name, miss.”

“How many times more am I to tell you that I will see no one who does not send up his name? Go down again, and ask the gentleman if he has business with me, and if so, what it is.”

The maid returns with an old envelope in her hand. As Miss Beauchamp takes it her breath stops and the colour rushes to her face. On it is scrawled in ungainly writing:

“JAMES AMORY, Esq.

Theatre Royal, Leadstone.”

"Tell him to walk up," she articulates slowly, but in so changed a voice that the servant looks at her with surprise before she leaves the room.

As the door closes behind her Stella leaps from the sofa and rushes to the mirror. Her heart is beating rapidly, and she has turned very pale. He has come to reproach her—she feels he has; she will be obliged to tell him everything, and put him out of suspense at once. But the task makes her heart fail even in prospect. She seizes a flask of eau-de-cologne from the table, and deluges her face and hands. He shall not see that it costs her anything. Then she poses herself in a graceful attitude against the mantelpiece, and tries to look careless and unconcerned, with a smile of welcome directed to the door. But as it opens all her courage evaporates. She has only time to exclaim in a nervous manner to Maria, "Not at home to any one, mind!" when it has closed again, and she knows, rather than sees, she is standing face to face with Amor Carrington.

"How do you do?" she tries to say quietly and without any visible effort, as she holds out her hand. But he rushes forward and clasps her in his arms.

"My darling," he ejaculates fervently, "is it possible I see you again?" and his lips are on her own before she has had time even to meet his eyes. The action takes her so completely by surprise that, forgetting all she intended to say or do, she yields to the

natural impulse of her heart, and lets herself be kissed without a remonstrance.

Indeed I am not sure that she does not return the attention. Any way Amor Carrington appears to be quite satisfied with his reception.

"My dearest," he exclaims as he holds her a little way from him to look at her beautiful features, and then clasps her afresh in his strong arms, "what a weary, weary time it is since I have seen you! How I have longed to meet you again! But it has come at last, you see, Stella—it has come at last!"

"But how is it you are here? You never said you were coming," she answers, feeling dreadfully guilty as she leans against him. She knows she ought not to be there; she knows she is but making the task before her more hard, and yet the pitiful coward has not the strength of mind to disengage herself. His touch has so vividly restored the remembrance of the moonlight drives they took together.

"Why, didn't you order me not to write to you, you cruel girl? I was miserable when I first got that letter, Stella; but after a while I saw that you were right. In your position you cannot be too careful of what people say, my darling; and after all, when I am so sure that you love me, I can exist without seeing it written down, if you think it better for your own sake that I should do so."

How confident he is! How his beautiful soft eyes

glow as he gazes into her face! How can she tell him now—just when they have met again—that it is not letters only that must cease between them?

“Besides, I have a great piece of news for you, Stella; we shall not require to write to each other, I hope, for a long time to come. I have got a London engagement.”

“You!—here!” she stammers, hardly knowing what she says in her sudden surprise and dilemma.

“Yes; are you not glad? I was half mad when I received the offer. I have a three months’ engagement with the English Opera Company at ten pounds a week. Perhaps I may travel with them afterwards, but that is a long time to come. Meanwhile, I shall be in the same place as yourself: able to see you every day if you choose. O my darling! it is happiness too great for speech.” And suiting the action to the word, he squeezes her instead of speaking. Her mind is all in a turmoil. A great conflict is going on inside her. He is to be here—*here*, by her side for weeks together. What shall she do? Shall she give up everything she has been thinking of—relinquish money and title and position—and yield herself up to this new delicious feeling which Amor Carrington’s return seems to have aroused in her? She cannot decide. There is too great a stake on either side.

“Ten pounds a week is not much, my darling,”

he says presently as they still stand together—"five hundred a year; but if I can only make it a certainty, I think it might be enough, with your earnings, you know——" And here he hesitates.

"What for?" she says uncompromisingly.

"I know it's not what you've a right to expect," he continues bashfully, "and if I had my will you should be surrounded by all the luxuries of the universe; but you knew I was a poor hard-working fellow when you first cared for me, Stella."

"I don't know what you mean!" she cries, yet very much afraid of the explanation.

"Don't you, you shy little puss? But I believe you do! Well, then, I'll tell you plainly. I think that when I can earn five hundred a year, considering what you draw, we might be married—if *you're* quite agreeable."

"Ah, *when* you do!" she echoes with a sigh of relief that he doesn't do it yet.

"But haven't I just told you that I am engaged to take it?"

"For three months."

"O my darling! don't damp all my ardour. If now, why not afterwards? I am sure to improve as I go on."

"When you know more of the profession, Amor, you will find it is the most uncertain one in the world."

"But we should be *two* to work, dearest!"

"Oh, I never intended to marry any one who can't take me off the stage. I've drudged enough as it is. And it is twice as bad for a married woman as for a girl. I don't think I should see the fun of that at all."

His face falls, but only for a moment.

"What a fool I was to mention it, Stella! But I am half off my head with the delight of seeing you again. Of course you shall never work after we are married. What am I for indeed, but to work for you and yours to my life's end! I only thought perhaps it might hasten our happiness. But we will leave the future alone for to-day, and think only of the present. Come and sit down on the sofa, dearest, and tell me if you are glad to see me again."

Now is the time to tell him! But she suffers herself to be led to the sofa, and sits down close beside him with his arm round her waist, and lays her face against his shoulder, and feels as if she would like to cry.

"Say you are glad to see me, Stella!"

"I *am* glad, Amor." And it is the truth. She is so glad, that she is frightened at herself.

"That's a darling!" with another shower of kisses. "And now let me tell you how happy I am at your success. I have been devouring the notices in the papers, and longing to be able to see you in the part.

I must go to the Empress to-night. Will you give me an order, or may I come behind with you?"

She shudders at the idea of his going behind. Why, every soul in the theatre, from the call-boy to the manager, would guess the relations between them before he had been there half an hour.

"Oh, not behind," she says hurriedly; "they're awfully particular at the Empress, and there might be a fuss about it. I must give you an order for the front."

"But I may wait to see you home, dearest, mayn't I? That is my privilege, you know?"

"You had better not, Amor; you are not known here, and people might talk."

"Let them talk, dearest, and send them to me for an answer. You know what that would be. That you are my own particular property, and I'll fight any man who disputes it."

"Yes, of course; only——"

"Only *what*, Stella?"

"Look here, Amor," she says nervously. "I'm very glad you've got this engagement, and that we shall be together and all that sort of thing; but you mustn't let people think that you're in love with me——"

"That we're in love with each other, you mean!" he interrupts gaily.

"That we're in love with each other," she echoes, "or you'll ruin me."

"Ruin you! How?"

"In my professional prospects. I'm sure if the manager or the lessees of the theatre—Lord Henry Mecklington is one of the lessees——"

"Is he? I'm sorry to hear it."

"Well, it's no fault of mine, you know, only he's horribly disagreeable—you saw that at Leadstone—and if he were to guess anything about us he might make it very unpleasant for me."

"Which means that I am to tell no one that we are engaged to each other," he says gloomily.

"Oh, indeed you must not!" she exclaims in alarm. "You mustn't hint at such a thing, or even affect to care for me. And, Amor, in London, you know—that is, in society—it is not considered etiquette for people to make love to each other in public, so I am sure, for my sake, you will be very particular."

"I think I prefer the country to London under the circumstances. However, just tell me what I am expected to do, and I will follow it."

"*Do!* why, do nothing, but treat me as you would any other lady. And, above all things, don't run after me before other people, or look at me, or single me out in any way for your attentions."

"That's a pleasant prospect, Stella. And how am I to behave when we are in private, eh?"

"O Amor, I don't know! Just as you please, I suppose."

"That's a very wide margin. Take care I don't take advantage of it."

"But you'll be good in public? And don't let Fanny know we are anything but friends. That woman is the greatest gossip in creation, and would go cackling it round the town in half an hour."

"You are terribly afraid any one should know you love me, Stella."

"Only for both our sakes. It would be different if there were any chance of our being married. But there isn't. And perhaps, you know—there *never will be, Amor*," she concludes, with an upward glance to see how he takes the notion.

He takes it very badly.

"Don't say that, my darling. It is not true, and is like the crack of doom to me. We *will* be married, if we have to wait ten years for it! You shall see how hard I will work to gain myself a reputation, and make me worthier of you. And then, Stella—*then*—"

She cannot lift her face to meet the eyes that she knows are burning with love above her. She only sighs deeply, and wishes she had the courage to plunge the knife in there and then and kill his hope.

"Don't sigh, my dearest."

"It is all so far off—and improbable."

"Far off perhaps, but why improbable?"

"We might die, or cease to care for each other, or marry somebody else," she answers in a low voice.

But he laughs at the idea.

"We may *die*," he says; "God only can be judge of that; but *I* shall never marry any woman but you, Stella."

CHAPTER VIII.

The Star at Home.

MISS BEAUCHAMP goes to the theatre that evening in a very miserable frame of mind. The leaden weight that oppressed her whilst she was keeping Amor Carrington in a state of suspense is gone; but it has been replaced by something much worse. She feels guiltier than she has ever done before. Not that she has behaved falsely this afternoon to the man she is forced to acknowledge that she loves, for her conduct to him was entirely dictated by her wishes; but she knows she is going to crush the best feelings of which she is capable, and act against the promptings of both her heart and conscience, and she despises herself for it. She has only put off the evil day too. Sooner or later it must arrive; and her best hope is that Amor Carrington may become disgusted with her fickleness or tired of her beauty, before it is

necessary she should break the truth to him. Meanwhile she walks upon the edge of a precipice. She has no intention of giving up Lord Henry and her chance of a coronet; on the contrary, the young tenor's determination to win and keep her at all costs has made her feel that the sooner his lordship declares his intentions and puts a stop to the whole proceeding, the better. Yet he appears even more distasteful to her than usual that evening, and she can hardly bear his familiarities with patience. She is fractious and out of temper, and gets a good deal of chaff on the subject from her friends, and gives not a few sharp answers in return.

She tries not to look towards the stage-box where she knows that Amor Carrington is sitting; but she feels his eyes are on her all the time, and every now and then hers are drawn magnetically to meet them, and she cannot help her soul shining through them as they do so, although she knows that each look is fraught with danger for both of them. She goes through her part almost mechanically, longing for the moment when she may be alone and look her position in the face. For the episode of the afternoon, and the dangerous longing it has awakened in her breast, has taught her that henceforward it must be one thing or the other—love or position, Amor Carrington or Lord Henry Mecklington—and that the sooner she comes to a final decision, the better. She knows herself too

well not to guess beforehand what that decision will be; but the fact does not tend to increase her good opinion of her own wisdom or of her lordly admirer. She declines his attendance home so abruptly as to be almost rude: declares she has a headache and is going straight to bed; and drives off with Fanny Reed with hardly so much as a civil good-night to him.

"And pray what may be the matter now?" demands her companion, who has heard nothing of Amor Carrington's visit.

"I have a headache. Didn't you hear me say so?"

"But that is no reason you should snub Lord Henry after that fashion. If you have a headache, I should have thought it was his business to hold the eau-de-cologne flask."

"Thank you. I expect I shall have enough of that kind of thing when we are married. He is just the kind of old twaddler who would be for ever running after a woman with foot-warmers and scent-bottles. I can dispense with his services till then."

"You are the most ungrateful girl I ever knew. Fancy quarrelling with a man for his attentions! Most women would quarrel for the lack of them. If you show your teeth to him like this before marriage, perhaps you will frighten him out of it altogether."

“Do you think so? Really! Well, my opinion is it would not be much loss if I did.”

And as she says it, she is conscious that she would not be altogether sorry were Fate kindly to interfere and wrench asunder the Gordian knot she has not the courage to snap for herself. Yet alone in her own chamber, when she places the two positions plainly before her mental vision, her courage sinks again. On the one hand there is the position of Lady Henry Mecklington, living in a house in Mayfair, with a couple of country estates to go to whenever she is tired of London, lolling in her carriage as it drives slowly up and down the Row, dressed by a Court milliner, and mixing in the upper circles of society; rather “dummy” perhaps—Stella Beauchamp has seen too much of life not to be aware that the dwellers in aristocratic circles are by no means the happiest or liveliest people in the world—but with an undeniable name and position, and the chance, if Providence so pleases, of being left some day to enjoy herself without the assistance of his lordship. Then, on the other hand, the position of Amor Carrington’s wife. Apartments or a tiny house in the Bohemian locality of St. John’s Wood or the Regent’s Park; a life spent probably upon the stage, or (if Amor took the burden of bread-winning entirely on himself) half the time away from her husband; with a family of children perhaps—and the idea of a family of children is the

bitterest drop of all in this probable cup of Stella's; and then, when they grew up and required more money than Amor could make, or Amor himself grew stout or lazy, or lost his voice, and she had arrived at middle age, she would most likely have to step out of her privacy again, and commence a second period of public drudgery when her name was forgotten and her beauty gone, and she had to begin afresh on the lowest rung of the ladder.

No, she can't do it! She is very fond of Amor. He's a very handsome fellow, and *wonderfully* improved since they first met at Leadstone (indeed, had her mind not been full of other things, she would hardly have recognised him that afternoon for the countryfied young man she had quizzed into care for his personal appearance); and he has a beautiful voice, and may probably make a name for himself; but she cannot wait whilst he is making it.

Love is very delightful—there is no doubt about that—Stella sighs when she remembers *how* delightful; but it is all folly and romance after all, and a man, or woman either, must be but a poor creature who cannot shake it off at will. The world is a practical world, and our feelings won't buy us bread and meat. Miss Beauchamp is resolved that she will show herself to be a sensible woman, who has her feelings under control and can order them as she chooses. They may

not like to go where she would drive them, but Lord Henry's wealth and title shall be their whip and spur. Only of one thing she is certain—once married, she must *never see Amor Carrington again*.

A worse woman than Stella Beauchamp might contemplate her marriage as a stepping-stone to liberty of thought and action; but though she can trample on her honesty, she will not intentionally slay her virtue. She cries a little as she thinks of it—more than a little indeed—but she is quite resolved. And all that now remains is to determine the best way by which to let Mr. Carrington know her intentions. That is a harder question to answer than any other. She thinks of his confidence in her, which no hints or surmises seem able to undermine, and feels the disclosure of her purpose must be left to chance and time. Perhaps Lord Henry, finding a rival in the field, may be incited to propose at once to her, when she thinks she might be able to tell Amor the truth—in a letter. Or, if not, there can be no present talk of marriage between herself and him; and when he has once commenced his engagement they will not be able to see much of each other; and in a few months they must separate for the provinces; and—in fact, Stella's peace of mind, like that of many another, is founded on the hope of putting off the evil day, and not of averting it. She retires to bed as perplexed as ever, excepting on that one point—that whatever she

wishes and whatever she feels, she *must marry* Lord Henry Mecklington.

The first complication arising from the propinquity of the rival suitors takes place the following morning, when Lord Henry calls early to inquire after her headache of the night before.

"It is better, thank you," she replies, standing to receive him.

"Am I detaining you from anything?"

"Not from anything particular; but I am always busy in the morning."

"I know it is very early to call, but my anxiety about you must be my excuse."

Stella yawns, and looks at her watch.

"It is terribly early; not twelve o'clock."

"I hardly expected to find you up. You do not generally rise so soon."

"No; but I was restless last night, and could not sleep."

"Do you not think a drive would do you good? Might I have the honour of taking you down to Richmond this afternoon?"

"Not to-day, Lord Henry, thank you; I really require rest. When I am better, I shall be delighted. But to-day I must keep quiet and deny myself to every one."

She evidently wishes him to go then, for she declines to take a seat at his invitation, saying she has

no time to sit down, and that her dressmaker has been waiting to see her for the last hour. The hint is too broad not to be accepted. Lord Henry takes up his hat, and says he supposes he must tear himself away. Just as he is holding her hand, however, and making pretty speeches for what appears to Stella an interminable farewell, the drawing-room door is thrown open, and Amor Carrington, with a look of confidence and joyous expectation on his face that is unmistakable, appears upon the threshold.

Stella reddens up to the parting of her hair; Lord Henry drops her hand like a hot coal; and Carrington looks from one to the other with the blank astonishment of a man who has a right to be amazed. The woman, as is usual in all cases of perplexity, recovers herself first, and comes forward smiling.

"How do you do, Mr. Carrington? I have just been complimenting Lord Henry Mecklington on his habits of early rising; but you seem to rival him. What brings you out of bed so soon?"

"Might I not ask you the same question?" he replies in a low voice.

But Miss Beauchamp will have no lowered voices before Lord Henry; they are too dangerous. The tone in which she answers is quite shrill.

"Oh, I rise at all sorts of times, and go to bed in the same fashion, when I can! But you are both

very bold to imagine you would be admitted at this hour."

"But you see I was," observes Lord Henry, with a significant glance at his hostess.

"And I never imagined anything but that I should be," says the tenor.

At these words his lordship turns, and scowls at the new-comer. As he scowls, he starts. Yet he says nothing, but returns to the book he is holding in his hand as though the other were beneath his notice.

"Lord Henry, I think you must have met Mr. Carrington before," says Stella, nettled at his manner.

"Indeed! I am not aware that I have had the honour."

"He was playing at Leadstone with me. He has just come to town to take up an engagement with the English Opera Company."

"Indeed!" repeats his lordship, with elevated brows; "I had not heard of it."

He bows stiffly to Carrington and returns to his book. He has laid down his hat again, and is evidently determined not to go while the other stays. Stella grows fidgety, and does not know how to act. She would like to talk to Carrington, who begins to look uneasy; but she dares not offend Lord Henry by doing so. So she stands between the two, throwing a word first to one and then to the other, and they all three

look as uncomfortable as it is possible for a trio to do. At last Lord Henry closes his book, and throws it down on the table. Time is getting on, and his cabriolet is waiting at the door to carry him to fulfil another engagement.

"I fear I must go, Miss Beauchamp," he says, drawing on his canary-coloured gloves; but I have a few words to say to you that concern ourselves alone. Might I beg a moment's private conversation?"

"Certainly," she answers, as she leads him into a small room adjoining, and leaves Amor standing by himself.

"Who is that fellow?" demands Lord Henry, as soon as ever they are alone.

"Only a young man from the country. He's a very well-meaning fellow. Why do you ask?"

"I fancied I had seen him before. What does he mean by calling on you at this time in the morning?"

"I suppose it's his ignorance; it's the first time he has ever set foot in London."

"Well, I wish you'd teach him better manners, then. I don't like men coming about you in this familiar way. You must make him keep his distance."

"Why, you're not *jealous*!" she says, with an arch smile.

"Hardly, my dear girl—of such as he. But there's

an assurance about him I don't like. How long has he been in London?"

"Oh, not long," she answers, afraid to say that he only arrived the day before.

"Well, you mustn't let him or any one think he can come and go here as he chooses."

"Not even *you*, Lord Henry!"

He takes her hand and smiles self-confidently.

"Ah! *I* am different, am I not? Well, I shall look in again this afternoon, and see if I can't tempt you out into the Row for an hour. And now go and dismiss that lout as soon as you can, and take the rest you require. *Au revoir.*"

She stands where he leaves her for a minute or two, musing. How she hates his dyed hair and wrinkled skin and faultless attire! How she wishes that he would tumble out of his cabriolet and be killed, or fall in love with somebody else, and cease to tempt her with that bait which she has not the courage to resist! Her teeth are set and her hands clenched whilst she thinks of it; but she unlocks them as she goes in to face Amor Carrington.

It is his turn now. He is standing somewhat moodily at one of the windows, looking out upon the street. Evidently he does not approve of the secret conference she has been holding with Lord Henry. She sees that at a glance.

"Well?" she says interrogatively, as he turns round.

"Is that old brute gone?" is his reply.

"What a disrespectful way of speaking of his lordship! Do you know that he is one of the lessees of the Empress Theatre, and that if he chose to dismiss your humble servant from the company, he has full power to do so?"

"You told me so yesterday, and I said I was sorry to hear it. I hate that man, Stella, with his confounded airs and stuck-up nonsense."

"Oh, don't say that, Amor! You don't know what a powerful patron he is of mine."

"What did he want to say to you just now?"

"He asked who you were."

"His lordship doesn't recognize me, then?"

"I think not, and I hope he mayn't. It would be a terrible thing for you if he did."

"Why?"

"Because he was so angry at the time you met at Leadstone; and if he recognised you, he might say that he wouldn't meet you, or something horrible, and then what *should* I do?"

"Would his lordship's absence affect you so very much, my darling?"

"Oh, no; of course not—except for his patronage."

"Hang his patronage!" cries Carrington.

"My dear Amor, you don't know of what you are talking. He has been the making of me this season."

"Your own talent should be the making of you. Look here, Stella; from the first moment I saw that man I took a dislike to him. He's in love with you, and he will take you from me, if he can."

"O Amor!"

"Oh, I daresay you think it impossible, dearest; but you are good enough for any station in life—far too good for such a poor devil as I am; and a title is a strong temptation to a woman. Tell me the truth, Stella. Do you let Lord Henry make love to you?"

"I can't help his admiring me," she says evasively.

"Of course not—every one does that; and I should be the first to find fault with the man who didn't. But does he ever speak to you of love?"

"He has certainly alluded to it."

"And you don't encourage him?"

"O Amor, haven't I said that I love you?"

"My darling, I know you have, and I trust you as I trust Heaven! But what you wrote to me about yourself is very true. You are young and beautiful, and in a dangerous position. Are you sure this man has no worse designs on you than admiration for your personal attractions?"

Miss Beauchamp draws herself up to her full height.

"What do you take me for, Amor? What do you take Lord Henry for?"

"I take you for a possession so priceless, that the mere thought of losing you drives me frantic. I take him for a plastered old libertine, who would think no more of ruining a girl than looking at her."

"I cannot hear you speak of Lord Henry in such terms. I am in his employ, and it is disloyal that I should do so. No one knows that there is any understanding between us; and I shall be afraid to introduce you to any of my friends, if you are going to be jealous of every little thing."

"I won't say any more about it," he rejoins mournfully; "but don't let me meet that man more than is necessary during my stay in London, because there will be a row if I do."

"I mean to keep you apart as much as possible," she answers. And then there ensues that silence which is so significant after an argument between two friends.

Amor sits still, and does nothing. Stella hums a lively air, which is intended to express that everything is satisfactorily concluded, and commences to move the ornaments on the table.

"What are you looking for?" demands Carrington gloomily.

"Only some invitation notes I told Fanny to write this morning. But I suppose she has taken them up to her own room."

"Are you going to have a party, then?"

"Yes, on the ninth." But then she halts, feeling that the next thing she must do is to ask him. But she would rather not, because Lord Henry is to be present.

"Oh, that is Saturday," he rejoins. "I hope I am to have an invitation, Stella."

There is no help for it. She can't refuse.

"Of course," she answers gaily; "a dozen, if you like. But it will be a very swell affair, Amor, and I'm afraid a very stupid one. All dress-clothes and button-holes, and a great deal of conversation and very little to eat. I don't think you'll care about it."

"I always care to be with you," he says affectionately; and I shall like to see you doing the honours of your own house to your swell friends. And you won't be ashamed of me amongst them darling?"

"Amor!" she answers. She always takes refuge in that word "Amor" whenever she finds herself in a dilemma out of which there is no way but through a falsehood. I recommend the practice to my female friends under similar circumstances. They may find it will save them on occasions from uttering a direct untruth, although there are few perhaps that will thank me for the suggestion.

These two visits, little as has occurred in them, have quite exhausted Stella in her efforts to preserve her equilibrium with both friends, and she dismisses Amor Carrington as soon as she can, simply that her

perplexed mind may have some leisure in which to commune with itself. She foresees difficulties like "Alps upon Alps arise," and wonders—not what the end will be, but how soon it will come.

She thinks it better not to refuse to drive with Lord Henry in the afternoon; and as they return home is inwardly congratulating herself on the fact that he appears to have forgotten all about her guest of the morning, when he suddenly startles her with the question:

"By the way, what did you call that fellow who was at your house to-day?"

"Mr. Carrington."

"Is he the man who sang the boating-song for De Courcy the night I was at Leadstone?"

"He may be."

"Oh, come, you must know as much about him as all that, since he has the effrontery to call on you in town."

"Well, I believe he is the man. What of it?"

"What of it! A great deal. Do you know that that fellow insulted me grossly behind the scenes that night? That he refused to let me pass him, and, when I insisted, stood up and wanted to fight me?"

"No, I didn't."

"Did he not mention the occurrence to you?"

"If he did, I am not likely to remember such a trifle."

"A trifle, do you call it—an insult offered from a cad of an actor to a man in my position? But you women are no judges of what passes between men. Only I'm sorry to have to say it, but I can't meet that man, Miss Beauchamp."

"How do you mean, not meet him?"

"I mean that I cannot enter your house again when he is there, and you may tell him so. I do not understand how such a man has become sufficiently intimate to be on visiting terms with you; but since he is, you must not ask me to meet him, for I won't."

This threat alarms her. Money-bags and coronet seem slipping away from her grasp.

"Oh, don't say that, Lord Henry! You know that the last thing I should wish to do is to offend you."

"Offended, my dear girl!" he replies, as he takes her hand. "It would take a great deal to make me feel offended with you. Only I do not wish you to allow that man to continue his visits to your house."

She is silent, wondering what she is to do now; and he goes on:

"It is not much, I think, for me to ask of you. It must be a matter of pure indifference whether you see this Carrington, or whatever his name is, or not; and it is quite impossible that you can see us both.

And in our position," he adds, squeezing the hand he holds, "I hope that I have not only sufficient right to prefer the request, but sufficient influence to enforce it."

"Of course you have," she answers in a low voice. "But," thinking to bring him to the point, "if people knew I permitted you to regulate my conduct in such matters — people somehow seem to find out everything — wouldn't they think it rather strange, as if there was more between us than there is, Lord Henry?"

"There can never be more between us than I should be proud for the world to recognise," he says gallantly. "But if a greater right is required to authorise my interference, when will you give me that right?"

"I will tell you when you ask for it."

"Ah, don't give me too gracious an answer, or you will embolden me to ask for it at once. But you must be freed from the toils of the theatre first, and I suppose the other lessees would be down upon me at once if I persuaded you to break your engagement."

"Oh, I couldn't do that," she says hastily.

"Exactly; so we must wait a little. Meanwhile, you will acknowledge I am not overstepping my privileges in demanding that this man Carrington may be excluded from your visiting-list."

"I will attend to what you say," Stella answers, with her heart like lead, and her brain in a whirl with wondering how she is to carry out his directions. But the difficulty is solved by his parting words.

"By the way," he says, as he hands her out of the carriage, "I am afraid I shall be unable to attend your little *réunion* on Saturday. An uncle of mine, who has just returned from India, has a gathering of the clans on that day, and we are all expected to attend."

"I am so sorry," she murmurs. She is so glad. She has been unable to think what on earth to say in order to put Amor Carrington off for Saturday.

"Yes, I fear it's inevitable. Fancy what a melancholy exchange for me! That large dull house with all its solemn festivities, instead of this lively little nook, with my goddess enshrined in light."

"I daresay you will enjoy it much more than you anticipate. It is generally the case when we expect a party to be stupid. Mine will be dull enough without you."

"That sentence almost reconciles me to my banishment," he answers, as he takes his final leave.

She has tided over this wave in safety, so she thinks, and she must trust to chance to do the rest. Neither Amor Carrington nor Lord Henry see much of her during the ensuing days. She is always either

asleep, or engaged, or out when they call. Naturally asleep, or engaged, or out on purpose! She is most anxious they should not clash, and she does not want to see too much of either of them until the proposal of marriage, which Lord Henry has as good as said he intends to offer her, has been formally made.

But on Saturday evening she determines to enjoy herself. She breathes freer when her padded admirer is away, and she would like to make poor Amor happy just for this one evening, even though it be the last, and she may never be allowed to invite him to her house again. What a lucky chance it is that has taken Lord Henry off into the country, and left her free for once to do as she pleases! She leaves the theatre as early as she possibly can, and dresses herself with the utmost care, delighted with the opportunity of making herself fair in Carrington's eyes, and the prospect of hearing him say she is so.

Her tiny rooms are soon filled with guests of all ranks and grades—for it is one of the best proofs of Stella Beauchamp's spotless reputation that she is on intimate terms with ladies of the highest position—and Amor Carrington is amongst the first to arrive. He looks so handsome, and so well in his evening clothes, that she hears people on all sides asking who he is; and after he has become known as the new tenor about to appear with the English Opera Company, and has sung his first song, the applause that

bursts forth, and the numerous introductions to him that follow, make her feel as proud as though he really belonged to herself, and she were not about to sever the holy link between them for the sake of a worn-out old *roué* with a title. She sidles up to him all smiles and blushes, and lays her hand upon his arm.

"Was I not right?" she whispers. "Did I not prophesy what they would think of you in London?"

"I care nothing for what they think," he says hurriedly; "I care for but one thing—what *you* think, Stella."

"You *know* what I think, Amor."

"Say it again, dearest."

"That yours is the most beautiful voice I ever heard. It haunts me."

A glow of pleasure mantles his countenance. They are standing together in one of the curtained windows: she in her pale evening dress, with flowers in her bosom and her hair, looking up into his face with such a look of pride mingled with her despair; he gazing down upon her beautiful features with the utmost love and exultation. No one seeing them stand together and look like this could mistake their mutual feelings. The men nudge each other with the whisper, "That's a case." The women toss their noses and say Stella Beauchamp is evidently in for another flirtation, and how many does that make this

year? He and she hear nothing and see nothing — just at that moment — but each other. He has admired the flowers in her bosom, and she is trying to detach a sprig of stephanotis to place in his button-hole. The sprig is obstinate, and will not be easily extracted, and he stoops to assist her.

His hand touches her neck; his fingers tremble; his cheeks flush. The action brings their faces dangerously close together.

Stella watches him eagerly; and as he disengages the blossom he lifts his glowing eyes to hers. The temptation is too great; she feels he is all her own, and she cannot help saying it.

“Love!” she whispers passionately.

All the blood in his body rushes to his face at the welcome syllable. He cannot answer for emotion; he only gazes at her, and then takes her hand and draws it through his arm.

All this passes in a moment. The bystanders have, most of them, seen nothing of it.

Yet they have had one spectator. As they turn to cross the room again they encounter, standing just before them, the figure of Lord Henry Mecklington!

CHAPTER IX.

A Charming Surprise.

STELLA BEAUCHAMP is not the woman usually to be cowed by the glance of a man's eye. Her indomitable spirit, which is but too well known to her friends, is her own pride and boast. Yet, as she turns from having whispered that one first genuine touch of passion into Amor Carrington's ear, to confront the angry astonished glance of Lord Henry Mecklington, she actually trembles. Not at the idea of his lordship's remonstrance. She would care nothing individually—on the contrary, perhaps she would be secretly relieved—were that padded figure and those dyed whiskers to betake themselves, then, there, and for ever, from out her presence.

The man is as despicable to her as he is repulsive; but he is her patron, and ambition holds a very prominent part in the composition of Stella Beauchamp. There are some women constituted in that respect more like men than women; or rather let me say, more like what the ideal man should be; that is, the passion for fame—the thirst for success—if not stronger in them than any other feeling, is at least (so long as their affections are not deeply concerned) strong enough to make them believe it is so. The strongest of all earthly feelings is love. There

can be no doubt of that. Philosophers may jeer at the assertion, the jilted may dispute it, the cold and the aged may find it difficult to accept; yet the fact remains, that in all ages, men and women, the cleverest, even the best of the human species, have been known to cast policy, ambition, money, success to the winds, to follow the all-absorbing passion that draws us to each other; that makes us, while it lasts (be the time short or long), thoroughly contented with the goods the gods have given us, and willing to let all less-important, though perhaps worthier aims go to—well, wherever they may choose! But there is such a thing as a sleeping love. There is a little Cupid nestled even now somewhere in Stella's woman's heart, who wakes at times and annoys her with his wailing, but she will not recognise him by his name. She calls him fancy, or folly, or infatuation; and thoroughly believes that were she to cast her ambition to the winds, and take to cuddling the new-born stranger in its stead, he would disappoint all her hopes and make her miserable. So, when she is suddenly discovered tampering with Cupid behind the curtain, and Nemesis, in the person of Lord Henry Mecklington, looms upon her, she is quite ready to tell a lie, or do anything equally feminine and dishonourable to assuage his wrath. Dissolving views, not only of a coronet and a carriage, but of worldly esteem and popularity, flit rapidly before her

eyes; and if the quickness with which she disengages herself from Amor Carrington, and advances with an uneasy smile to meet the lessee of the Empress Theatre, is a guarantee of her interest in the one man and her indifference towards the other, the poor tenor stands a very bad chance indeed.

"Lord Henry!" she exclaims, extending her hand, "is it really you? What a charming surprise! I thought you were down somewhere in the country."

"I was to have been down somewhere in the country, Miss Beauchamp," he retorts without appearing to notice her proffered hand; "but I gave up my engagement for the pleasure of attending your party. I might, however, I think, have spared myself the trouble! I do not appear to be wanted?"

"How can you say so, when you know how disappointed I was at the announcement of your intended absence? How did you manage to get off your engagement? One's own people are generally so dreadfully *exigeantes* in such matters."

"Come here and I will tell you," he answers abruptly as he draws her out upon the landing. And then he turns round upon her fiercely.

"What do you mean by having that man here?" he demands.

"Which man? there are so many."

"You know which man well enough. That cad of

a singer who insulted me at Leadstone. You promised me he should not come to the house."

"I could not help it," she says deprecatingly, and with the sole desire to shield herself. "He heard of my party, and came as a matter of course."

"Without an invitation?"

"Without an invitation," she answers, with a shudder at her own cowardice.

"The presuming snob! This is what you lay yourself open to by admitting such people to your intimacy. But I will soon teach him better manners. He shall learn the penalty of infringing the laws of etiquette after this fashion."

"Lord Henry, what are you going to do?"

"I am going to read this man Barrington, or Carington, or whatever the brute's name may be, a lesson he will not easily forget. I am going to show him that he cannot enter any lady's house, where *I* am an intimate guest, with impunity."

"Oh! pray don't have a row. Perhaps I was wrong not to tell him decidedly he could not come. I shall be miserable if there is any fuss made about it."

"You may have been right or wrong. It makes no difference to me. I refuse to remain in the same house with that fellow, and either he or I must go. Which is it to be?"

"Try and bear it for to-night," she urges coaxingly.

"Pray don't make an open quarrel. I promise you it shall never happen again."

"I will not bear it for another minute! You must make your choice—now and for ever. *Is that man to go, or am I?*"

"Oh, Lord Henry—not you!"

"I have your sanction, then, for desiring him to leave?"

"Let me tell him, then," she says anxiously, trying to pass upstairs. "I will say everything you can wish, but it will come better from my lips than yours."

But Lord Henry placed himself in the gangway.

"No, Miss Beauchamp. I will not delegate the task to any one, least of all to you. This man insulted me at Leadstone. I have a right to snub him now. Either I must request him to leave, or leave myself. It is for you to decide which."

"If you must tell him, you *must*," she says, panting as she sinks down on a seat in the recess of the landing; "but do be as quiet over it as you can. Don't let all the room know."

"That is *my* business," replies Lord Henry as he makes his way up again to the little overcrowded drawing-room.

Amor Carrington is standing where Stella left him, in the enclosure by the window. He does not relish the peremptory way in which Lord Henry Mecklington

has whisked off his goddess from his side; but her last sweet passionate utterance is ringing in his ears, and he still looks flushed and happy. He glances eagerly at the doorway as his lordship re-enters, and is surprised to perceive that Miss Beauchamp does not accompany him—still more to see Lord Henry (with an unmistakable expression of resentment in his face) make his way up to his side.

“May I ask by whose invitation you came to this house?” he says rudely as he confronts the tenor.

Carrington draws himself up to his full height, and looks down upon his perky padded lordship grandly. He has not mixed sufficiently in the society of ladies to be otherwise than distant and restrained with them; diffidence of himself and respect for their position combine to render him silent and ill at ease. But with men his manners are very different. He has seen and associated with all sorts, and thinks no more of a lord than of a super; indeed, if the super be honest and the lord a liar, he thinks the super the higher of the two. And so when Lord Henry, with all the impertinence of face and manner which the nobly born of either sex can at times assume (lowering themselves beneath the level of the most illiterate of paupers by so doing) struts up to Carrington's side and puts the insulting question recorded above, the tenor neither blushes nor stammers as he replies:

“May I ask what business it is of yours to ask it?”

Everybody in the tiny apartment has heard the words, and everybody is immediately silent to listen for the issue.

"It is emphatically my business, sir. I am one of Miss Beauchamp's most intimate friends, and in her name I demand what right you have to present yourself here this evening?"

"And in her name I refuse to gratify you."

"Do you know who I am, sir?"

"I have that honour."

"Then, in plain words, will you leave this house, or will you not?"

"Certainly not *for you!*"

"You will compel me to make you, sir."

"You had better try."

Up to this juncture Carrington, though he has flushed with annoyance and uncertainty, has preserved a perfect equanimity of speech and demeanour. But the ladies of the party, in anticipation of something unpleasant happening, have huddled away together in a corner of the room, and the men have advanced in a little body of eight or ten and surrounded the combatants.

"What is it all about?" demands the evergreen De Courcy, who is well acquainted with Lord Henry.

"Simply this, gentlemen," replies his lordship, "that this fellow has presumed to intrude himself upon

Miss Beauchamp's presence this evening without an invitation."

"It is not true!" exclaims Carrington.

"Do you mean to give me the lie, sir?"

"If you make that statement on your own authority—*yes!*"

"This is not to be borne! I'll teach you what it is, you hound, to insult your superiors."

"I'll teach you what it is to call me names, as soon as we are outside," retaliates the tenor as he commenced to handle his coat-sleeves.

"Come, come, we can't have anything of that sort here," interposes De Courcy. "Lord Henry, what is it that you wish?"

"I demand that that man leaves the house, and does not re-enter it!"

"And I refuse to go on the authority of any one except Miss Beauchamp," says Carrington.

"It is in Miss Beauchamp's name that I am acting. She desires that you will quit her presence."

"Then she must tell me so herself," replies Carrington proudly. "I came here on her invitation, and I will leave at no one else's request."

"I can't understand it; but it is easily settled," said De Courcy. "Where is Miss Beauchamp?"

"I will fetch her; she shall tell him to go herself," cries Lord Henry as he leaves the room; the tenor awaiting her coming silent and composed.

A little anxious, perhaps, and greatly annoyed, but otherwise calm, hopeful, even confident, yet as she appears leaning on his lordship's arm and looking greatly embarrassed, Amor Carrington suddenly pales. But that is all the token he betrays of the sudden failing of his trust in her.

"Miss Beauchamp," exclaims Lord Henry, "this *gentleman*," with emphasis, "will not believe that it is by your desire I requested him to leave the house. Will you be good enough to inform him of your wishes by word of mouth?"

"I think it is better you should go," she says hurriedly and in a half whisper. "Lord Henry and you don't seem to get on well together; and these disagreements are so unpleasant and——"

Amor Carrington fixes his eyes on hers.

"If *you* wish it——" he commences sorrowfully.

"I think it best. It is all my fault, I know. I ought not to have asked you together," she stammers, wretched at the complicated turn affairs have taken.

"You never asked him! He has intruded himself here without an invitation," shouts Lord Henry.

"I have not!" exclaims the other, with a look of fury.

"Has he or has he not? Miss Beauchamp? Don't be afraid of exposing the fellow's insolence," says Lord Henry to his companion.

"Have I or have I not?" repeats Carrington firmly as he also turns to her.

The unhappy woman is at her wits' end to know how to evade the ends of justice. Oh, why cannot she be true to her nature and to the man whom in her heart she loves? Because on the other hand stands her patron and probable husband,—the stepping-stone by whom she expects to rise to social and artistic distinction—by whom she hopes to gratify her vanity, ambition, and love of ease; and what is the worth of the heart of a country-bred lover when weighed in the balance against such advantages as these?

She ponders, pales, and is silent.

"Did you not give me an invitation?" repeats Carrington in a softer tone.

"I think—I am not sure—perhaps there was some mistake," she falters finally, as her eyes sink upon the ground and her form looks ready to follow them.

"It was a mistake?" echoes her lover.

"I don't know—I can't remember. I did not mean you to understand——" she goes on confusedly.

"That is quite sufficient," interrupts Lord Henry authoritatively. "You hear—do you not?—that Miss Beauchamp denies asking you to come here this evening, and therefore your appearance is an unwarrantable

and impertinent intrusion, of which you will please to rid us as soon as possible."

"Lord Henry, there is no need of any violence," says De Courcy hurriedly. "I am sure now that Carrington understands that Miss Beauchamp wishes it, he will have the good sense and feeling to withdraw himself from her presence without any further disturbance."

The tenor raises his eyes to the speaker's face. As he does so, all the women observe how ghastly pale his own has grown, and how compressed and livid are his lips.

"Thank you, De Courcy," he says shortly; and then turning to Stella, "I go once and for ever, at your request, Miss Beauchamp," he utters, and with a formal bow leaves the room.

"Yes! and I'll take very good care you keep your word and never come back again," exclaims Lord Henry as he follows Carrington down, with a view to giving him a parting insult. One or two men try to restrain him, but in his desire for revenge he breaks from them. The tenor permits him to accompany him into the little hall without an attempt at retaliation.

"I guessed what your bravado would end in, you cad," Lord Henry says insolently. "I thought I'd teach you how to behave to a man in my position. You may think yourself deuced lucky I don't kick you out of doors."

"May I?" exclaims Amor Carrington as he wheels round suddenly and knocks his assailant over with a well-directed blow between the eyes. Lord Henry staggers to his feet and rushes to the attack; but the young man has the strength of an ox, and in another moment his enemy has measured his length for the second time upon the oilcloth.

And this time he does not get up again.

The maid, who is loitering in the passage, screams; the gentlemen crowd down the little staircase; the ladies hang in alarm over the balusters. Only Stella Beauchamp, heartsick and trembling, has not the courage to rush and see which of her admirers has got the worst of it, but sits downcast and weeping in the drawing-room, and almost wishing she had never been born. By the time the men reached the hall Carrington has already raised his lordship.

"I am afraid I've punished him rather severely," he says coolly as he delivered him over to De Courcy; "but it was his own fault. You had better send for a doctor if he does not recover soon; and if anything comes of the matter you know my address."

With which words he walks out of the house and slams the door after him.

Lord Henry does not come to himself for some time afterwards, and when he does he is very confused and shaky and has to be taken home in a cab. He is an older man than he looks or professes to be,

and the shock has considerably upset him. The unpleasant occurrence of the evening naturally breaks up the party, and Stella is soon left to pour out her complaints, regrets, and reproaches into the ear of Fanny Reed. At first all her sympathies seem to be with Lord Henry Mecklington. He has been physically worsted in the encounter, and women are quick converts to a fit of unconsciousness or a few drops of blood. They are always on the side of the weak and the wounded, and ready to turn round upon the victor, even though the combat has been fought in their behalf. She thinks it was cowardly, brutal, wicked of Amor Carrington to go and revenge himself upon poor dear Lord Henry in that horrid way. He might have killed him, and then there would have been a nice scandal in her house. As it is, all the world will be talking about her. What business has Carrington to make her the gossip of the town in that way? He ought to be ashamed of himself. And to knock down Lord Henry Mecklington too! If it had been any common man it would have been different; but a lord and a lessee! He must be quite mad to have thought of such a thing. And of course he has completely ruined his own prospects. *She* can never ask him into her house again after the business of to-night. Lord Henry wouldn't hear of it, even if she would; and she only hopes she may never see Amor Carrington again nor hear his name even, for it seems

to have brought ill luck on her from the beginning. And then she cries, first for poor Lord Henry, and then for poor Amor Carrington perhaps, though she won't acknowledge it, and finally for herself and the incomparable stupidity with which she has played her cards and brought all this trouble on her head.

"I shall never see him again, and he's just as likely to die as not," she sobs to Fanny Reed, mixing up her lovers in her divided sympathy in the most beautiful confusion; "and what on earth he should have done it for, when he knew I was so particularly anxious there should be no row between them; but it's just like his selfishness not to wish anybody even to come into the house. However, it's all over now, and he has no one to blame for it but himself; and if anything happens to Lord Henry I'm pretty sure to get the sack from the Empress; and, of course, I can't marry him, or anything; and I wish Emma Halsted had been at the bottom of the sea before she had persuaded me to go to Leadstone and make Carrington's acquaintance at all."

Fanny Reed for once is sensible enough to hold her tongue. What is the use of talking to a woman who has got herself into a scrape by trying to drive tandem? If you tell her that it is no matter, she accuses you of want of feeling; if you say it will all come right by and by, she calls you a fool; if you suggest it is entirely due to her own folly, she flies at

you like a wild cat. The best method of treating her is by silence. Miss Reed has learnt the best method; not from her own wit, but by dint of several phases of bitter experience. So she sits by, and offers no comment until Stella, sick of bemoaning her fate to herself, gets up suddenly, informs her companion she knows nothing about it, and bounces off to bed in a rage.

CHAPTER X.

An Exalted Star.

THE days go by rather unsatisfactorily after this incident. Lord Henry does not appear at the Empress, nor at Miss Beauchamp's residence, for more than a week, during which time she is kept in a state of terrible suspense as to whether he intends ever to renew their acquaintanceship on the same footing as before. Perhaps the insult he has received may be too much for his forgiveness, and he will look out for some other "house of call" than hers—one where the company is less mixed and the danger of having his brains knocked out less imminent. The idea is terrible to her. Lord Henry's friendship has been her one boast, and the envy of all her female acquaintances. How will she ever bear to have it said that he has cut her? She is willing to risk everything rather than such a contingency. So she does all in her power to heal the

breach made by the tenor's roughness. Each morning she sends a little note to his lordship's chambers to inquire how he is going on, accompanied by a few flowers or a little fruit, or such trifles as ladies *may* indulge themselves by sending to gentlemen who are sick.

The notes are answered, but not too warmly. The deadly insult he has received in her house cannot all at once be separated in Lord Henry's feeble imagination from herself. She suffers agonies of suspense from his reticence, and Amor Carrington comes off worse at her hands at this period than, perhaps, at any other. She throws all the blame of the matter on the unfortunate tenor. What business had he to take it for granted that she desired either his affection or his company? To make the fact of a mere flirtation in the country an excuse for pursuing her to London, and then to behave to her before all the world as though he were her accepted lover and future husband. It was too bad—it was unpardonable! She should never forgive him for the mischief he had done! As if it was likely that she could give up every prospect she had in life to be his *fiancée*, or even his friend! And then, because he found himself thwarted in his designs, he must needs turn round, like a country lout, who has no idea of fighting except with his fists, and assault a nobleman under her very eyes.

Poor dear Lord Henry! If anything happened to him in consequence she should never get over it. She would dress in black crape and bombazine to the day of her death.

But nothing did happen to Lord Henry, except a few bruises, a swollen face, and a cut lip; and as soon as arnica and Time have obliterated the marks of his late misfortune, and the stiffness, which was the result of an encounter between his poor old backbone and the edge of an open door, has subsided, he emerges once more from his seclusion, and presents himself in Miss Beauchamp's drawing-room. Stella is all raptures at his reappearance. She has no words hard enough for the conduct of his assailant; no expressions of sympathy warm enough for himself. She even goes down on her knees in her pretty graceful way by the side of his lordship's chair, in her anxiety to express all she feels concerning the horrible disaster that has happened to him for her sake. Lord Henry is not insensible to the honour she does him. He takes the pretty hand that is laid upon his arm, so confidingly, and conveys it to his lips.

"My dear girl," he says patronisingly, "it was no fault of yours. I cannot hear you blame yourself. In the exercise of your profession you are compelled unfortunately to associate with men and women beneath you in station. The only mistake lies in ad-

mitting them to your house. But it will not occur again, I feel assured."

"Oh, indeed it will not, Lord Henry; I shall take good care of that. I never was so frightened in my life. I thought he had killed you."

Lord Henry turns, and kisses the beaming face looking up into his own.

"Poor little girl!—poor little darling!" he says as he pats the hand he holds. "And so you were really alarmed on my account?"

"Oh, terribly!"

"There was no need. The cur gave me rather a hard knock, and it was so unexpected I had no time to ward it off; but blood tells, my dear; and it would take more than the fists of a Carrington to knock the life out of a Mecklington. I should like to punish the brute though."

"Oh, don't talk like that! You will never attempt it again, will you?"

"Not if he doesn't come in my way; and you are the best person to prevent that. I am not likely to meet the snob anywhere else."

"You don't think you are likely to meet him *here*," she murmurs reproachfully.

"I hope not. But you women are fickle cattle to deal with."

"Oh, Lord Henry, how you misjudge me!"

"Not at all, my dear child. But I suppose the

brute admires you—as who would not?—and your sex find worship from the other very hard to resist.”

“Not when we love some one else,” says Stella, with downcast look.

His lordship regards her curiously, and his own eyes light up—not with love, but sensuality.

“By Jove! And so you really like me, little one, eh?”

Miss Beauchamp blushes, and is silent.

(N.B. This may appear unnatural; but it is a fact that some women can blush when they choose, as some other women can cry. How they do it Heaven alone—who manufactured their mysterious and complicated natures—knows; but the truth remains, and is incontrovertible, amongst all who have powers of observation and a wide range of acquaintance amongst the female portion of creation.)

How beautiful is silence! How touching a maiden's blush!

Lord Henry finds them so. They are indisputable answers to his question.

“Come, then, that's all right,” he says in a tone of satisfaction; “we understand each other, don't we? And when is it to be then, eh?”

“So very sudden,” she whispers, “so unexpected!”

“Nonsense! You know you've been expecting it all along, you little witch; so no sham modesty now. I want to visit Spain this year, and be off about the middle of July. Will that suit your ladyship?”

How delightful the term sounds in her ear! It is like a foretaste of all the pleasures to come. This is worth dismissing Amor Carrington for. She would rather have spent her honeymoon in London, so that her first triumph might be viewed by those who can never share it: but she supposes that a visit to Spain and the dubious delight of Lord Henry's sole companionship cannot last for ever. And it is her present object above all things to comply with his smallest wishes.

"The middle of July!" she says bashfully, "and this is the third week in June. That is horribly soon, isn't it?"

"Not a bit too soon for me, my dear," says his lordship expressively.

"Lord Henry, how can you? But to get ready one's things and all!"

"Never mind the things. They can be got afterwards. We shall stay in Paris on our way."

"But my engagement at the Empress——"

"Oh, curse the Empress! *I* will make that all right. I have only to speak to Roland, and the thing's done. And if he cuts up rough, what matters? It will make no difference to us, will it, Pussie, eh?"

"Only three weeks!" she repeats sentimentally. Perhaps at the moment she even persuaded herself she feels sentimental, but it is the thought of the position

that dazzles her. If she stopped one moment to think of Lord Henry as a husband, she would be more sentimental still—sentimental even to tears.

“*Only* three weeks!” echoes his lordship. “Why, it is a perfect eternity. I only wish I had known all this months ago. But I must not come to your house oftener than I have been in the habit of doing, Stella, or the world may begin to suspect something before the time. We must keep our own counsel, my dear, at all events for the present.”

“I must tell Fanny, before I go,” says Stella.

“Ah, before you go—yes, of course; but make her keep the secret. One can’t be too close about such matters.”

“But everybody must know it directly it takes place.”

“Well, naturally. A bright particular star like yourself cannot shoot from its orbit without being missed. But there is no need to let it go farther than is absolutely necessary. And when we are safe in Spain, it will make very little difference to us, eh?”

“None at all,” replies Stella meditatively. She is thinking what a shine there shall be about it directly she gets within the confines of Bohemia again.

“That’s a jolly girl,” continues his lordship. “I knew you were a brick the first day I saw you, Stella. And I’ve been awfully fond of you ever since, as you

know. I've meant to speak to you about this little business over and over again, but I never like to hurry a woman. You shall never regret it, my dear, you may depend upon that. You are provided for from this time henceforward."

"I am sure you will be always good to me, Lord Henry."

"Good! By Jove! I should rather think so. Good's no name for it. Only you must ask no more tenors to your house without my permission, mind. I shall be very despotic, and expect to have a voice in everything respecting the establishment."

"Of course you will. I know my duty too well not to anticipate it."

"By the way, where would you like to live? I've got a jolly house in Portland Place, but I should not like to put you there."

"Why? Is it damp?"

His lordship laughs.

"Frightfully! Old into the bargain, full of rats, and hideously dull. No, we will pitch our tent in a more cheerful district. What do you say to the Grove Road, or thereabouts? A detached house covered with creepers, and a garden for strawberry-and-cream parties?"

"I should like nothing better. I love flowers."

"Very good. Then I'll set the house-agents to work at once. And you can choose the furniture

according to your own taste, and by the time we come back from Spain we shall find it ready for use."

"Oh, Lord Henry, you are too kind to me."

"Not at all, my dear girl. I might say the same to you. But time is up I fear, and I must be toddling. You must give me a kiss before I go."

She raises her lips to meet the dyed moustache of his lordship, and cannot help a slight shudder as she does so. But then it is new to her to be embraced by Lord Henry Mecklington, and a woman has to be inured gradually to this kind of thing. So she tells herself. She forgets that it seemed to come very naturally to her to kiss Amor Carrington. But it is convenient occasionally to forget the feelings we have done with.

"You are quite my own now," says his lordship gallantly in parting, "and I would defend the possession of you with my life. *Au revoir*. I shall be here to-morrow morning without fail. Perhaps you may hear from me before then."

He leaves her standing by the table, flushed, triumphant, even happy, with a false sort of happiness. She has gained her point. Lord Henry has proposed to her! She is about to be elevated to the ranks of the peerage! She cannot keep it to herself one moment. She must tell Fanny. The echo of his lordship's footsteps has hardly died away along

the passage before she has flown up to her friend's room.

"Fanny I have a *great* secret to tell you, but you must promise not to repeat it. Lord Henry has proposed to me!"

"Oh, has he?" says Fanny.

"Yes; aren't you surprised?"

"Why should I be when you have told me for months past he was sure to do it?"

"We're to be married in three weeks, but you're not to breathe it to a soul. Mind!"

"That's funny!"

"Not at all. Lord Henry wishes it, and so do I. Only as there's the trousseau to get ready, I thought I must take you into my confidence."

"And where are you to be married?"

"Oh, that's not decided yet, but we're going to Spain for the honeymoon, which, I am afraid, will be abominably stupid. However, it can't last for ever, that's one comfort! Well; aren't you glad?"

"Very glad, for your sake. Particularly so."

"Why particularly so?"

"Because your marriage may stop people's tongues."

"Whose tongues? what tongues?" demands Miss Beauchamp, who is especially sensitive to anything like scandal regarding herself.

"Everybody's tongues! It was no use telling you

before, but you don't know what they have been saying about you and Lord Henry."

"What *could* they say? what was there to say?"

"Well, you know best, but Mrs. Martin told me only yesterday that his intimacy here is the common talk of the town. And that a lady whom she met somewhere out the other day expressed great surprise at hearing that Mrs. Martin knew you, and said she thought that no one visited you on account of Lord Henry Mecklington."

Miss Beauchamp flushes scarlet and trembles with indignation.

"Very good," she says with quivering lips. "Mrs. Martin shall know what *I* think of her scandal, next time I see her. No one visit me indeed! I'll take good care Lady Henry Mecklington doesn't visit her, or her extremely respectable friend either. Why, they will be ready to drag themselves in the mud from here to Brixton to get a look at me."

"Are you going to live at Brixton?"

"How matter-of-fact you are! No; of course not. Is it likely Lord Henry would put his wife in a hole like that! I am to have my choice of any house in St. John's-wood I like. And I mean to choose a first-rater."

"Rather a Bohemian locality for a lord's wife, isn't it?"

"Not at all. No end of good people live there;

and Lord Henry and I are both so fond of flowers."

"It is to be love in a cottage, then, after all?"

"What do you mean by 'after all'?"

"You spoke so vehemently against such an idea in conjunction with poor Amory."

"Fanny, I will thank you never to mention that man's name to me again. It's a regular insult! A person who tried to murder my affianced husband under my very eyes! Decency alone would prevent my ever seeing or speaking to him again."

"Exactly. Well, I hope his lordship will make up to you for the loss of one of your truest friends. And I shall be very glad when the marriage is over and done with. I am sick of all this kind of thing."

"You're very polite!"

"I mean the scandal and the gossip. It will at all events have the effect of stopping that. And as the wedding is not to be talked of yet, I hope you will be very careful not to give any more cause of offence until the day arrives."

"Indeed, I shall do no such thing! I shall do exactly as I think fit. Let them talk; the more the better. It will be awful fun to see their consternation when they find they're wrong."

"But suppose anything prevented your marriage?"

"What should prevent it?"

"A dozen things might. Illness—or disagreement."

"What nonsense! I'm as well as possible; and do you suppose I should be such a fool as to quarrel with Lord Henry? I know which side my bread is buttered too well for that."

"Still, most women keep rather quiet just before their wedding."

"I am not 'most women,' and I intend to do just as I please. And if old mother Martin's tongue wags, so much the better. She'll wag it till it drops off before she will get an invitation to *my* house. So now, Fanny, please to lock your propriety away, for I'm not in a mood to listen to it."

Neither is she in a mood for many days after that. Lord Henry Mecklington is very cautious what he says to her in public; but it is most difficult to conceal that there is an understanding between them, and the pride of possession is unmistakable. New jewels flash upon her hands and on her bosom; she accompanies him in his carriage wherever he chooses to take her; she appeals to him by look, if not by word of mouth, before she does anything; and he orders her about as if he had a right to do so. No one who sees them together can help observing, even from the extra caution they take in addressing one another, that all private reserve has been broken down.

And this is the mistake that people who are anxious to conceal their real relations from the world's

eye invariably fall into. They may in public keep at different ends of the room; they may arrive and depart by themselves; they may avoid dancing or singing, or even speaking to each other; but the very fact of the avoidance makes them severally nervous, ill at ease, *distracted*, and unlike themselves. And then when they *do* meet, be it only by a flash of the eye, their whole secret lies as open as the day.

You may break, you may shatter the vase, if you will,
But the scent of the roses will hang round it still;

and in like manner you may put a mask upon your face and a curb upon your tongue, but the light of love will shine through all and everything.

There is no love on Stella's part for her aristocratic friend; but there is the pride of the secret between them which she cannot entirely conceal, and there is the intense anxiety not to let the prize slip through her fingers by submitting her will to his in all things which she takes no pains to conceal. And the world reads more of the interior working of both her mind and that of Lord Henry than they would care to know of, and the world lays its wise finger to its nose, and talks in consequence. It has talked enough already, Heaven knows! It has called Stella Beauchamp's perfect features "*beauté du cochon*;" it has termed her genius "stage trickery;" it has decided her ambition to be "pure vanity;" it has designated her levity and defiance of public opinion by a much

harsher name; but it has only been able to say what it *thinks*. It has not been in a position to report what it *has been told*.

Now unfortunately it becomes so. Miss Beauchamp's little *tête-à-tête* dinners at Richmond with Lord Henry Mecklington, the late suppers of which he partakes at her rooms, the splendid brilliants that flash upon her fingers, the carriage and horses that wait for hours at her door to take her wherever her wayward fancy may dictate, even the new and extravagant dresses in which she suddenly appears—all bear their part in tearing her character to shreds. And not without reason! Fanny Reed implores her again and again to be less wilful and more cautious; but what does Stella care for Fanny's prudery?

She has chalked out her own path, and she will walk in it; and the more people blame or try to curb her, the more obstinately will she pursue her way. What does she care (so she tells her whining confidante) what the fools may say? *She* knows that it is all right, and that is quite sufficient. If she may not occasionally dine or sup *tête-à-tête* with her future husband, with whom may she venture on such an indulgence? And as for the jewellery, if any one else has a better right to claim it, let her prove so. It is not necessary because a girl wears an engagement-ring (well, two or three engagement-rings, if Fanny likes it better; she concludes there is no law to pre-

vent a woman wearing more than one if she so pleases)—it is not necessary in consequence, she repeats, to proclaim her coming marriage to the world.

“But for your own sake,” pleads Miss Reed, “I should have thought Lord Henry would have been too careful of his future wife’s reputation to risk its being questioned as he is doing now.”

“What nonsense, Fanny! As if you understood anything about it! Why, don’t you know that these bigwigs are not half so particular as we are? There is no need they should be; *their* bread doesn’t depend on their characters. They would starve if it did. When I am Lady Henry Mecklington I mean to let out ‘with a vengeance.’”

“Heaven forbid!” cries the outraged Fanny.

“I hope heaven won’t forbid. What’s the good of being a ‘lady’ if I mustn’t do as I like? Look at all these countesses and duchesses, how they carry on! Why, their *amours* are the talk of the season; and the higher they get in the social scale, the lower they become.”

“But you will never be like one of them?” says Miss Reed in alarm. “O Stella, promise me! You are very wild and thoughtless, but I know you are pure at heart. You will not let the mere fact of becoming a lord’s wife make you forget how hard you have struggled hitherto to keep an untarnished name. You will not become a scandal in society, like one of

the abandoned women you mention, whose sin is heavier than that of the commonest creature who walks our streets, because she has no occasion to sin, and her example leads thousands in the same way. O Stella, I know I am but a stupid companion for you, but I love you, my dear. Promise me, for the sake of your dead mother, that you will try to live a blameless life."

"I wish you wouldn't speak of my mother," says the other, with quivering lips.

Fanny Reed is crying bitterly; she is clinging to her friend as if she would wrest an answer from her. Stella does not appear to respond, but it is some time before she can trust herself to speak.

"You know that my mother died almost before I can remember," she says at last. "If she had lived everything would have been different for me; but I have been alone all my life—*utterly alone!* Don't worry yourself about me, Fanny," she continues kindly. "I cannot make any promises, but I think my pride will prevent my ever becoming an open scandal. As for the rest, you know why I am about to marry this man—to obtain a name and position in the world. What can you expect from such a marriage?"

"O Stella, don't marry him! It is not too late. What can you want with a better name than you have? All the dramatic world has been talking of

your ability and success. Why not be content with the position you have won for yourself?"

"I am weary of striving—I have an object to strive for," she answers in a low voice.

"It would come, dear. You would meet some one some day to make up to you for the want of relations. *Do you think Lord Henry will?*" Stella shudders. "And since you have had the misfortune to lose your mother, you should have a husband who could stand to you in place of her—some man in whom you could confide, on whom you could rest, with whom you might have entire sympathy, to whom you might—"

But Fanny Reed's eloquence is cut short by the shrill sound of Stella's laughter.

"My dear old Fan! where on earth have you been learning all this tirade of sentiment? You'll make me die of laughing if you go on much longer. *A man for a mother!* No, my dear girl; the man doesn't exist who could stand in the place of a mother to me. A mother's love is unselfish. She will sacrifice herself for her child. What man would do that for the woman he professes to adore?"

"There must be *some* who would do it."

"*I* have never met them, my dear, then, and I don't believe you ever will. However, don't let us talk any more about it, Fanny, because matters have gone too far now to be altered, even if I wished to

alter them, which I don't. If I were to lose my chance of being Lady Henry Mecklington, all my hopes for this world would be over. But I'm going to be a *highly respectable* Lady Henry—see if I'm not! Probably the first respectable one of the name; at least his lordship pointed out his plastered and painted-up old mother in the Park to me the other day, and I thought it should go hard with me if I ever looked half so disrespectable.”

“Isn't it rather strange he hasn't introduced you to Lady Mecklington?”

“Well—no; I don't think so. I have never mentioned the subject to him, because I imagine he wants our marriage to be kept a secret till it's over; and I conclude it is because the old woman would kick up a fuss about my being an actress. And once married, you know, I can have it all my own way; and I rather enjoy the idea of the rage she'll be in. It can make no difference to a man of Lord Henry's age—”

“What is his age?”

“Heaven knows! and I'm sure I don't care. Sixty, I should imagine, or seventy! The older the better, for I shall be the sooner rid of him.”

“What an awful feeling to enter upon marriage with!”

“Now, my child, no preaching; I can't stand it. No one supposes I love the man; I would not be such a hypocrite as to pretend it. And when you

don't love your husband, it doesn't signify two straws what he's like. Nothing can make him better—or worse!”

“Stella—forgive my asking you—*have you ever loved any one else?*”

Fanny glances up at her companion as she puts the question. Miss Beauchamp is standing perfectly upright and still, staring with fixed eyes at the opposite window; only her delicately-cut nostril is unusually dilated, and there is a large pulse beating prominently in her throat.

“Don't be angry,” pleads Miss Reed, looking at her.

“I am not angry; it is a very ordinary question. *No.*”

“Is that your answer?”

“Yes.”

“It's very lucky, I think,” says Fanny timidly.

“Very!”

“Because you'll have no unpleasant remembrances.”

“Exactly so.”

“And it will be all the easier to do your duty.”

“Yes.”

“And perhaps—who knows?—if he is very kind to you, and all that, you may come to love Lord Henry in time, Stella.”

But all the answer Stella makes to this remark is to cover up her face and burst into tears. She is angry with herself directly afterwards for this display

of feeling, and almost gets cross with Fanny for trying to allay it; therefore Miss Reed attempts to turn the current of her thoughts as soon as possible.

"Is the wedding-day fixed yet, Stella?"

"Not positively, but it is to be about the middle of July."

"This is the eighth."

"I know."

"When shall we hear definitely?"

"I am going to speak to Lord Henry about it to-morrow."

"I am glad of that, because there is a great deal still to get ready. You go to Paris first, don't you?"

"I believe so. Lord Henry forbids my speaking to Mr. Roland about getting a substitute for my part in *Husbands in Harness*. He said he would arrange all that; and I think he must have done it, from some hints Roland dropped last night. However, it will make no difference to me."

"How do you like the idea of leaving the boards?"

"Not very well. I almost think sometimes——"

"What?"

"That—no, I won't tell you. It's awfully silly, and I know I should get sick of it. We can't have everything in this world, can we, Fanny? I daresay you would like to have a husband, if the truth were told."

"If I could *choose* him, perhaps I would."

"You think I haven't chosen mine?"

"I think he has chosen you."

"It comes to the same thing, doesn't it? Anyway, I choose it shall be so. So no more remonstrances, my dear Fanny, or you sha'n't have an invitation to Lady Henry Mecklington's "At Homes."

And singing and dancing, Stella Beauchamp leaves the room.

Has the conversation come home to her—or not?

CHAPTER XI.

The Star in a Dilemma.

THE conversation here recorded takes place upon a Saturday afternoon, and on the next day Lord Henry has engaged to drive Miss Beauchamp down to Richmond. These drives are the most enjoyable part of the girl's present existence, and she has assented gladly. It is not only that she takes pride in the knowledge that, dressed in the height of the fashion, and perched upon the box-seat beside his lordship, with a couple of grooms sitting with folded arms behind her, she is the admired of all the other sex, and the envied of her own. She is quite cognisant of the looks that follow her and the comments that are made, as she is whisked by those spirited animals through the Park and along the road to Kew. But she does not really enjoy herself until she has passed beyond the crowd,

and is free to admire the country beauties that pave the way to Richmond. Notwithstanding that she lives in the glare of the gaslights, and by the sham frippery and sentiment of the stage, there is innate in Stella's breast the true woman's love for trees and flowers and the singing of the birds. She even feels a thrill, an inner consciousness of the capability to rise to something better than she has ever known before, when she hears the children shouting on Kew-green; although, were she taxed with harbouring such a sentiment, she would repudiate the accusation with scorn. But she grows thoughtful and silent as they enter on the less crowded thoroughfares, and leans back in her seat, and half closes her lovely eyes and indulges in a day-dream. But Lord Henry bears no part in her meditations. On the contrary, when he banters her upon her mood, all the illusion flies, and she comes back to the reality of life with a sigh.

"What were you thinking of?" he questions. "Dreaming of the all-important future?"

"No; I was only thinking about the cottages, and the little gardens, and the children. They all look so nice and comfortable, don't they? So quiet and simple. I wonder if the people who live in them are happy?"

"My dear child, what an absent idea! Have you ever been into one of those beastly little holes? I have. Their rooms are generally about six-foot square,

and full of smoke. Ugh! It makes one shudder even to think of."

She laughs at the picture.

"Ah! that is in winter, I suppose? I don't think they can be very pleasant then. But just now they have their gardens to sit in. Look at that man in his shirt sleeves leaning over the gate amongst the hollyhocks, with his baby in his arms and his pipe in his mouth. How the child grabs first at the pipe and then at the flowers! It is quite a picture."

"How romantic you're growing, my dear! I had no idea you had so much sentiment in you. Is it the prospect of the house in St. John's-wood that is making you poetical, Stella?"

She starts and colours.

"Oh, no! How can you be so silly? People like you and me are past all such rubbish. And these cottages, as you observed, are only pretty seen from the outside. Smoke in winter and earwigs in summer. I don't know which of the two would be worse. Only one gets a *countrified* feeling sometimes though. I'm sure it's not often it comes over me." And she sighs again.

"You would very soon get sick of it, my dear. Your pretty little person was made expressly to hang silks, and satins, and jewels, and laces on. You would fret yourself to death in a cotton gown."

"I am sure of it."

"And smother a baby if you had one?"

"I believe I should."

"And run away from your husband in three weeks?"

"Oh, I'm not quite so bad as that, Lord Henry."

"You've never been tried yet, remember. Marriage is the most disenchanting ceremony the law could have invented."

"That's a nice prospect for us! Perhaps we shall find it the same."

"No, no; our case is quite different."

"Everybody thinks that beforehand."

"I can't see the point, my dear. I don't know what you're driving at."

"Well, I wish you'd look what you're driving at yourself, for you nearly ran over that dog. Are we far from the Star and Garter now?"

"Close by. I've brought you by a new route. One turn more, and see—here we are!"

"An end to discussion, then—at all events, till after dinner," cries Stella, as she jumps nimbly to the ground.

The dinner passes off capitally (as all dinners given at the Star and Garter do). It was to have been a *tête-à-tête*, and Stella had fully intended to broach the subject of their wedding-day to Lord Henry during its continuance, and settle upon some definite time and place with him. But just as the

meal is served he enters the room with two other gentlemen, whom he introduces to her as Sir Cyril Taunton and Colonel Tollemache—friends whom he had met accidentally and invited to dine with him. Stella has naturally no objection to make to the proposal. The men are both young and good-looking. They consider an introduction to the beautiful Miss Beauchamp as a stroke of good fortune, and take pains to let her perceive it; and she, fond of flirtation and compliments and badinage, is quite ready to respond to anything they may have to say to her. She graces the head of the table; is treated in all respects as the mistress of it; and were she already Lady Henry Mecklington, she could not feel more proud or at her ease.

The dinner is unusually prolonged. Colonel Tollemache appears to have several matters of importance to discuss with his host, as they talk in low voices with their heads close together; but Sir Cyril (who is by far the best looking of the three men) devotes himself entirely to his fair companion, and before the meal is concluded they have become fast friends.

“Can you manage to amuse yourself for half an hour, my dear?” says Lord Henry as they rise from table. “I’ve a little business to transact with the Colonel here, I shall not be long.”

“Isn’t it very late?” she answers dubiously.

"Not particularly so; but late or early I must have a talk with Tollemache. Sir Cyril will look after you, I am sure."

"Only *too* delighted," murmurs the baronet. "It is a lovely evening, Miss Beauchamp. Cannot I persuade you to take a stroll on the garden terrace?"

"If Lord Henry has no objection," says Stella dutifully.

"My dear child! Amuse yourself, and I shall be contented. *Au revoir!* I'll return for you in about twenty minutes at latest. Come, Tollemache."

And the two men leave the room together.

Stella resumes the attire in which she drove down to Richmond, and saunters out upon the terrace with Sir Cyril Taunton. There they pace up and down in the moonlight, flirting with one another, that is, exchanging meaningless compliments and banter, accompanied by harmless little jokes and occasional laughter. That is what the awful social crime called "flirting" usually consists of; and the scandalmongers who dub it by a worse term will, in all probability, be much astonished when they open their eyes upon another world to find the iniquitous "flirts" seated several rows of seats in advance of themselves in the great auditorium of eternity.

So Stella and the young baronet pass the time away innocently enough until it suddenly occurs to them to look at their watches.

Twelve o'clock!

"Good gracious!" cries Stella. "Where can Lord Henry be?"

Sir Cyril offers to go in search of him, but fails to find him; the men in the billiard-room affirming that he and Colonel Tollemache left the apartment more than half an hour before.

"How very strange!" says Miss Beauchamp. "They must have forgotten all about me!"

"That can hardly be possible," replies Sir Cyril gallantly.

"But I can't remain here much longer! What would people think! And they expect me home to-night too. But I can't go alone!"

"Could I—might I—in default of Lord Henry's return—offer to escort you back to town?" inquires the baronet.

But to the imprudence of this suggestion even Stella Beauchamp is alive. If she does not return in company with her *fiancé*, she feels she must not return at all.

"Oh, no! that would never do! Lord Henry would be exceedingly annoyed at such a thing. I cannot imagine what detains him. He must come sooner or later!"

"You are cold! you are shivering!"

"I am shivering with excitement. This kind of thing frightens me. Supposing he never came?"

"That is hardly likely."

"But it might be, and I can't stay here with you all night. I am tired of walking now."

"Will you not go back to the hotel and rest?"

"I shall be obliged to presently, but you must not come with me! Oh, Sir Cyril! if it is not giving you too much trouble, *do* go once more and see if they have returned to the billiard-room."

But the inquiry is again futile. Nothing more has been seen of the two gentlemen.

"And the waiter asked me if you would require a bedroom, Miss Beauchamp."

"I can't sleep here. I have nothing with me. And what *will* they think at home?"

She is now in evident distress.

"Yet—if you will not return to town—what else is to be done? You must have more rest."

"Surely Lord Henry cannot be much longer!"

"I am afraid to raise your hopes on the subject. From what they told me just now——"

"What did they tell you?"

"Why, it's not very out of the way, you know, after a Richmond dinner; but I do not fancy Lord Henry is quite in a condition to take you home to-night."

"Is he *tipsy*?" Stella has seen so much of the bad side of the world that the idea disgusts more than it shocks her.

"I fear he is—*rather so!*"

"How disgusting! And when he had me in his charge! This decides me, Sir Cyril. I certainly won't go home with him now—I should be afraid to do so. So if you will be so kind as to order a bedroom for me I will return at once to the hotel."

He does as she requests him, and conducts her to the door of her sleeping apartment, when she dismisses him with many thanks and locks herself in with a vow to give Lord Henry one of the very best "dressings" he ever experienced in his life so soon as she shall set eyes on him the following morning.

CHAPTER XII.

Stella's Eyes are Opened.

WHEN Miss Beauchamp wakes the following morning in her strange bed at the Star and Garter, she is much more disposed to be angry with Lord Henry Mecklington for his defalcation than she had even been the night before. Her natural disgust and annoyance at finding he had so far forgotten what was due to his guest as to render himself unfit to accompany her back to town, had soon given way to the fatigue which rendered her indifferent to every consideration besides the comfort of repose. But when, rested and refreshed, she opens her eyes to the morning's light, and thinks calmly over the equivocal posi-

tion in which her lover has placed her, she grows angry and indignant again, and rises, determined to have an explanation from him of his conduct, and a reparation for the indignity he has offered her. She nearly pulls the bell down in her eagerness to procure further information, and the first question she puts to the chambermaid who answers her summons is whether Lord Henry Mecklington ordered breakfast over night or not. The woman naturally is ignorant of the waiter's business, but going to inquire, returns with the intelligence that no orders have been given on the subject whatever. Stella's blood boils anew as she reflects how entirely oblivious of her, and of her comfort, her companion appears to have been; but she demands that the meal may be served in a private sitting-room, and that his lordship may be informed that she awaits him there. After which she arrays herself in her dress of the day before (far too showy a dress for the early morning, but what alternative has she?), and descends to the breakfast-room majestically. It is eleven o'clock, the hotel is already alive with visitors. On the staircase she encounters several officers, who stare at her inquisitively—one, who knows her and bows, delighted at the advantage he has over his fellows—but the apartment to which her footsteps are directed is untenanted. The waiters begin to bustle about, bringing in the silver tea and coffee equipage, the hot rolls, the covered dishes, the

fanciful array of fruit and flowers, whilst Stella stands at the open window, looking listlessly into the garden, and wondering what the servants must think of the neglect with which she is treated. At last the preparations are completed; the waiter intimates that her breakfast is served, and stands ready to help her to what she may desire. But Miss Beauchamp will not seat herself at the table.

"I am waiting for Lord Henry Mecklington," she says, with feigned indifference. "Go and tell his lordship that breakfast is ready."

The servant leaves the room, but returns in a few moments with the information that his lordship is sound asleep, and has given especial orders he is not to be disturbed.

Stella bites her lip with vexation, and registers a silent oath to make "his lordship" pay for this escapade at some future time. But she is too proud to let the attendant see that she is surprised or annoyed.

"Very good," she answers calmly, "then I shall wait no longer."

"Coffee or tea, madam?"

"Coffee—yes, that will do. And you need not stay; I will ring when I want you again."

Left to herself, she scarcely eats anything, but plays with the food upon her plate, and wonders what excuse Lord Henry will have to make for him-

self when they meet again. She vows that he shall pay for his present treatment of her as man never paid before—but not just now. The stake she plays for is too heavy a one to be trifled with. She must wait until she has won the day; and then *he* shall know which is the conqueror and which the conquered.

As she meditates thus, sitting somewhat in the shadow of the curtains, but gazing out upon the terrace and the river, footsteps and voices approach her open window, which reaches to the ground. They belong evidently to some visitors to the hotel, who, waiting perhaps the advent of their breakfast, take advantage of the fine warm air to have a few turns up and down the stone balcony that surrounds the lower portion of the house.

As they draw nearer, and are about to pass her room, Stella shrinks out of sight. She is not desirous of being recognised in the character of Ariadne—it is one she has not been used to fill—but she can hear each word they say distinctly; and before she catches the drift of their conversation she has recognised one of the voices as that of Colonel Tolle-mache, Lord Henry's companion of the night before.

"You surprise me," says the other voice. "I have always heard her so well spoken of."

"In the profession perhaps, but not in her private life; at least, whoever said so could have known

nothing of the matter. Why, my dear fellow, she's notorious."

"What a pity! Such a pretty creature too—more than pretty, so refined!"

"Ah, Mecklington thinks the same as you do, evidently, but he makes no secret of his conquest. They are staying at this hotel now."

"Living publicly together?"

"Quite as much so as is desirable. Cyril Taunton and I dined here with them last night. There was no concealment about the matter. The divine Beauchamp looked like a goddess at the head of the table!"

"Will he marry her, do you think?" demanded the speaker whose voice is strange to her. The men have halted before her window now, believing the room to be unoccupied, and are leaning over the stone parapet that surrounds the balcony. Stella, with a face white with rage and lips of lead-colour, leans forward eagerly to catch their slightest word. "Do you think he means to marry her?" reiterates the stranger.

Colonel Tollemache's answer is preceded by a derisive laugh.

"Marry her! My dear Verdant Green, where have you been raised? Marry Stella Beauchamp! No. Mecklington is an old fool, I don't deny that. He's sunk a pot of money in the Empress's, which he'll

never see again, and a lot more, I have little doubt, on his fair inamorata; but he's not *quite* such an ass as you take him for, and still retains some little pride of birth."

"I should think almost any woman was too good for that painted and padded old donkey."

"Just so; but you are young, and still believe in the sex. *I* don't; or, at all events, I don't believe in Stella Beauchamp and creatures of that ilk. She'll ruin the man before she's done with him as it is, but it would be irretrievable ruin for him if he were to marry her—a woman without a shred of reputation. Why, all the dead and gone Mecklingtons would rise from their graves to forbid the banns."

"What *are* you talking about?" exclaims the cheerful voice of Sir Cyril Taunton, as he advances to join them.

"*La belle* Stella, *mon cher*. Annesley here will not believe but that she is immaculate!"

"Why try to shake his faith, then? All women are immaculate until we find them otherwise. But the fair Stella's face is against her; she's far too pretty to be let slip by the devil."

"I think you're rather smitten with her yourself, Cyril. Come, confess. Didn't you make play in old Mecklington's absence yesterday?"

"'Pon honour, I didn't—I wish now I had. But she was so awfully put out when she found the old

brute didn't turn up to drive her home, that I hadn't the heart to take advantage of the situation."

Colonel Tollemache roars with laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha! And so the vixen played 'Beauty in distress,' did she? That's a good one. Why, Mecklington was so 'screwed' he couldn't have held the reins—not that they ever intended to go back to town."

"O my dear fellow, I assure you they did; or, at all events, Miss Beauchamp did; because the carriage was ordered for them to return in."

"Ah, very well! I don't dispute it. It cannot make any difference how their plans were laid. This isn't their first visit to Richmond, nor will it be their last. In fact, Mecklington tells me he is going to take her over to Spain with him this year. Deuced expensive trip, with a woman to provide for; but a man has a right to do what he will with his own."

"Breakfast is served, sir," says an approaching waiter.

"All right. Come on, Annesley; come on, Taunton; let us go and see what goods the gods have provided us; and then if the fair Beauchamp shall have arisen from her balmy slumbers, we may be favoured with another view of her before her lord and master becomes sufficiently sober to whip her back to town."

* * * * *

The voices died away in the laughter, the balcony

is deserted, the moments creep on, and still Stella Beauchamp sits behind the curtain, silent and absorbed. Her face is ghastly pale, her eyes are staring, her nostrils dilated, her lips firmly pressed together. The conversation she has overheard seems to have turned her into stone—it has palsied her understanding. If there has been one thing about which she has been more sensitive than another, it has been her fair name. A light word, a joke, an innuendo, if it has turned upon that subject, has ever had the power to make her beautiful eyes shoot lightnings, and her proud lip curl. She has behaved with Lord Henry Mecklington familiarly, trustingly, because she has been afraid to thwart a man who has so much power to harm her professionally, and because she has fully believed his own word that he intends to marry her. But if he thinks to do so, and to keep the matter secret from his friends and family, he shall find he has come to the wrong quarter. She is not disposed to be Lady Henry Mecklington for the mere consciousness of the honour. She will be so only on the condition that the fact is blazoned throughout Europe. But *how* can he have been speaking of her, and his future connection with her, that these men should *dare* to mention her name as they have done? What could Lord Henry have been about to let such shameful reports get wind as were evidently being circulated amongst his acquaintances?

"She is notorious."

"Living publicly together."

"Not *quite* such an ass as to marry her."

"A woman without a shred of reputation."

"Too pretty to be let slip by the devil."

"Not their first visit to Richmond."

"Going to take her to Spain with him this year."

The sentences seem to have been burned into her very brain. They keep on repeating themselves without any effort on her part, and the oftener she hears them the whiter she becomes.

There is no more cruel moment in life for a woman than that in which she first hears her fair fame disputed. I am not going to argue whether such disputes ever occur without some occasion having been given for them. The old quotation, "The wife of Cæsar must not be suspected" (and which never sounds so grandiloquent as when proceeding from the lips of an infuriated husband with red whiskers and four-feet-nothing in his stockings), is all very well, but we know that in this world Cæsar's wife may think herself very lucky if she is only suspected; for Cæsar's wife, as a general rule, is not only suspected—she is talked about.

"Be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou wilt not escape calumny," says Hamlet; and the Danish court was evidently not different in those days from what courts, camps, and closets are in the present.

So long as a woman is ordinarily good-looking, companionable, and attractive, so long will she be accused of painting, flirting, and perhaps worse ("because who's to know, my dear," as the old hens cackle to one another, "if she goes on in that barefaced manner before the world, what may she *not* do when she's alone?"). And so long as a man is handsome, agreeable, and a favourite with women, so long also will his own sex try to detract from his general merits. They do not knock their heads together like the silly old women, and gabble like geese on a common—I will absolve them as far as that—but they run him down before his admirers; and if they meet with a strong opposition, they turn sulky and wont talk any more.

Alas for the weakness of our fellow-creatures! What a chapter might be written upon scandal! But it is to be read from living pages every day of our lives. No one escapes it; for the young and the beautiful are sneered at as traps set to catch the feet of the unwary, and the old and the steady laughed at for despising the pleasures they cannot attain to, and the God-fearing are called hypocritical, and the impulsive deceitful, and the frank are termed bold, and the retiring sly. Where are we to go to avoid detraction and calumny in this lying world of ours? Nowhere! Happy the man and woman who, having outlived the first horror of finding themselves food for

public talk, learn to disregard it as they would the slimy track of a snail. But the lesson has to be learned, and the first study of it is deep pain. It is agony at this moment to Stella Beauchamp; her smooth brow contracts, and her white teeth press hardly on the lip beneath them, and she sits, fixed and immovable, in the window-seat. At last she stirs; a sound reaches her from the grand staircase—only a peal of girlish laughter, mingled with a man's deeper tones—but it rouses her to the knowledge that she is not alone; that any moment Lord Henry may enter the room, or *they* may present themselves, confident, in the bold assertion that she is "a woman of no reputation," that they will receive a welcome at her hands. The thought stings her into action; she leaps to her feet and hurriedly rings the bell.

"Bring me pen and ink and paper," she says to the waiter. "Be quick!—I want them directly; and order a carriage to take me back at once to town."

"His lordship's carriage, madam?"

She stamps her foot.

"What have I to do with his lordship's carriage? No, of course not. A fly from the hotel, and tell them to make haste. I must return at once. Let me have my bill."

"Certainly, madam," replies the waiter, and retires in astonishment to make his own comments on the matter to his fellow-servants. When he returns to tell

her the carriage is waiting, she is already dressed in her fanciful little bonnet and lace cloak, and has laid a note upon the table.

"Take that to Lord Henry Mecklington," she says as she points to it, "and tell him that it was quite impossible I could wait for him any longer, as business takes me back to London."

And then she walks through the little crowd assembled in the hall haughtily, almost defiantly, as though she dared them to think other of her than she is, and gets into the vehicle and drives back to town, her heart burning all the way with indignation at the manner in which she has been treated, and a determination to make Lord Henry at once purge her character from the foul aspersions with which his attentions have defiled it.

Meanwhile his lordship sleeps on unsuspectingly. He sleeps the sleep of the justly drunken until nearly three o'clock in the afternoon, when he opens his bloodshot eyes, and yawns, and turns himself about, and wonders where the deuce he can have got to. Not being able to decide matters satisfactorily in so much of his mind as his debauch of the previous night has left to him, he rings the bell, and stares at the man who answers it as vacuously as he stared at the room.

"Where the devil am I?" says his lordship.

"Star and Garter, my lord. Dined here last

night, my lord. Shall I bring your lordship's shaving water?"

"Yes—no—stay! What o'clock is it?"

"Three o'clock, my lord."

"Gad! so late as that? I think I must have taken a little more than was good for me last night. Did I dine here yesterday?"

"Yes, my lord; with the lady, my lord."

"Hang it? the little Beauchamp," cries Lord Henry, jumping out of bed, as recollection flashes back upon him. "Where is the lady? Has she had her breakfast yet?"

"She had her breakfast at ten o'clock, my lord, and went back to London."

"Is she gone?"

"Yes; my lord. The lady left a note for you. I'll go and fetch it."

Whilst the servant is away, Lord Henry puts his hands to his head and tries to think. Gone away! Stella gone back to London by herself! What has she done that for? Why couldn't she wait for him? The note, which his shaking fingers can just hold steady enough for his bleary eyes to read, does not make matters much clearer to his addled brain.

"MY DEAR LORD HENRY,—I have heard a rumour this morning which renders it absolutely necessary that we should come to an understanding at once.

As it does not appear as though you would be down in time to take me back to London, I am going home by myself. But I trust that as soon as you receive this you will follow me, as it is imperative that I should speak to you to-day.

"Yours sincerely,

"STELLA BEAUCHAMP."

But one idea conveys itself to his mind distinctly—that he must follow her as soon as possible. She is evidently offended by his neglect, so he thinks; and, by George! it was a dirty trick of Tollemache to let him get screwed when he knew he had Stella under his care; but he will soon set that right when he sees her again. A bouquet of flowers, a box of bonbons, a new bracelet—what woman born of Eve was ever proof against such peace-offerings as these? But he must lose no time now in laying them at her feet.

"Here, Boots, bring up my hot water, will you? and send some one to shave me as quick as ever you can. Let me have a brandy-and-soda here at once, and order my carriage to be round in half an hour. I must start as soon as it is possible to get it ready."

And shaking and grumbling and swearing at the absence of the accustomed help afforded by his valet, Lord Henry contrives at last to induct himself into his clothes; and having paid his bill, and cursed

everybody who comes in his way, from the manager of the hotel to the ostler, he climbs up to his box, gathers the reins in his unsteady hands, and turns his horses' heads towards London.

"If 'e don't 'ave a spill afore 'e gets 'em to town, I'm blow'd!" exclaims the last man he cursed before he started on his way.

CHAPTER XIII.

"I'll Live it down."

BUT the evil augury is averted. Lord Henry's thoroughbreds arrive at Miss Beauchamp's door about an hour later, dusty, foam-flecked, and panting, but their worthless and ignoble master has not, technically speaking, "turned a hair." He only looks more padded, dyed, and bilious than usual, as he alights from his curricule and demands admittance to his lady's presence.

She is waiting for him in her little drawing-room, proudly cold and distant.

"Well, Lord Henry," she says without the least hurry, as she withdraws the hand he attempts to hold, "and what explanation have you to offer of your extraordinary conduct to me last night?"

"With regard to my having forgotten myself a little, my dear Stella, you mean?" he commences

awkwardly. "Well, it was very wrong of me—deuced wrong—I acknowledge that—"

"Be so good as not to swear in my presence!" she interrupts him haughtily. His lordship stares, but bows in submission.

"But 'twas all Tollemache's fault, 'pon my honour it was. He persuaded me to have a game of billiards with him, and the points were deu—I mean very high, and I kept on losing, which put me in a devil of a rage; and the consequence of that was—"

"That you entirely lost sight of what was due to me as your guest and a woman under your protection, and left me to get home as I best could, or to make what provision for the night I chose. Gentlemanly conduct, I must say, to ask a lady to dine with you, to take her a dozen miles from home, and then to get tipsy, and leave her to look after herself!"

"I can't tell you how sorry I am, my dear; 'pon soul I can't; but Tollemache should never have let me go on drinking at that rate. He knew as well as I did that I had left you with Taunton."

"And you are old enough to be his father," she says contemptuously.

"Well, not quite that; but I believe he has the advantage of me, on the right side, in point of years. But what am I to say to make you understand how deeply I feel this accident? It was an accident, Stella,

I can assure you—a pure accident. I don't know even how I got to bed; but when I woke this morning, and found you had already left Richmond, I thought I should have gone crazy."

"A pure accident was it? You must have gained very little control over yourself during all these years, Lord Henry. Pray do you know the insults to which your 'pure accident' exposed me? Do you know the manner in which your *friends*—your mentor, Colonel Tollemache, whose fault entirely it is that you made an exhibition of yourself—spoke of *me* in consequence? Do you know what I overheard them say as I was sitting at the open window of my breakfast-room this morning?"

"No; 'pon word. How should I?" says his lordship.

"They spoke of me," cries Stella, her excitement rising with the occasion, "as if I were the lowest woman that walks this earth. They connected our names—yours and mine—familiarily together, and put the worst possible construction upon our intimacy. They mentioned the probability of my going to Spain with you this year, in the same breath as that with which they laughed at the idea of your marrying me. In fact, they showered the grossest insults upon my character—*my* character, which I would die to defend. And all this I have to thank *you* for! You, who had so little consideration for my good name, that you

could take me down to Richmond, and leave me to pass the night there without any explanation to your friends of how the accident occurred. But it could not have been only that: there must be some ulterior motive for their base insinuations. You cannot have spoken of me and of our intimacy with the respect due to it and myself, or no man would have dared to mention your future wife in the shameless words I overheard this morning."

She pauses—partly from want of breath, more from emotion, which prevents her speech—Lord Henry staring at her helplessly.

"Have you not heard what I said?" she recommences shrilly. "Do you intend to stand by quietly and hear my character taken away by such men as Tollemache and Taunton?"

"My dear little girl," he says soothingly, "I really think you must have exaggerated the matter."

But to try and soothe a woman in Stella Beauchamp's frame of mind is like stroking an irate tigress.

"Exaggerate! How can I exaggerate when I tell you the very words they used? They said I was 'notorious.' That I hadn't 'a shred of reputation.' They even hinted that I was living under your protection, and that all the world knew it. How can I exaggerate such lies as those? You know that they

are lies, and you ought to be the first to resent them."

"I shall resent them. I may have told Tollemache more than was prudent, but he had no right to speak of it so openly. He shall make you an ample apology. You may depend upon me for exacting it."

"Speak of it so openly! But that is not the offence. What right has he to speak of me in such a manner at all? What have I ever done to deserve it?"

"Now, my dear child, you are putting yourself out for nothing. Tollemache has no right to speak so, of course, and, as I said before, he must make amends to you. But I can answer for it, he never would have discussed your name in any fashion had he thought you were within hearing. He is a perfect gentleman."

"A gentleman! And lies away a woman's character!"

"Now, my dear Stella, be reasonable. The fact is you are very much put out to-day, and no wonder. I confess I have behaved very badly, and deserve any punishment you may see fit to impose on me. But the culprit sues for forgiveness. He entreats his fair enslaver to overlook a first misdemeanour, and to accept this little token as a pledge that he will take the utmost care never to offend her again."

Saying which, his lordship produces a morocco

case, containing a magnificent bracelet in chased gold, and attempts to clasp it on Miss Beauchamp's wrist.

But she puts the offering away from her firmly but gracefully.

"Not yet, Lord Henry, thank you. I will forgive you for the part you took in this unhappy business, but it can only be on one condition—that you prove to these men that if, by your reticence, you have misled them with regard to your estimation of myself, you never had any intention regarding me save one."

"Haven't I already said that I will admonish Tollemache on the subject? What can I do more? No word of mine, I can assure you, has ever given him authority to speak of you as he has done."

"How, then, did he hear we intend visiting Spain together?"

"Ah, I may have let that slip inadvertently last night. A man cannot stand sponsor for all he says in his cups, you know, my dear. And the great pleasure I feel in the anticipation of our journey helped probably to send me off my head."

"It is a pity you forgot to tell him we are to be married before we go!" she says scornfully.

Lord Henry stares at her, and answers nothing.

"Listen to me, Lord Henry. I have been keeping our engagement secret at your own request, but I

will do so no longer. You asked me to say nothing about our intended marriage till the season was over, and I consented; but I never dreamt that such a fearful construction would be put upon our intimacy. It is usual in such cases, I believe, for the gentleman to ask the lady to fix the wedding-day; but my circumstances are so peculiar I have no hesitation in reversing the position. Indeed I do not *ask*—I demand that you at once fix a time for our marriage; that it shall take place publicly; and that until it does take place you discontinue your visits to my house, and write and inform the ‘perfect gentlemen’ who are the authors of this calumny of your intentions respecting me, and the reason of your previous silence.”

She turns away from him as she concludes, and regards her own image in the glass. She knows the moment has arrived for a decision; but she little thinks what that decision is to be. Her companion looks uneasy, fidgets with his cane and hat and gloves, but does not answer.

“Well!” she ejaculates presently, “why don’t you speak?”

“Why, really, my dear girl, you have placed me in such a very awkward predicament—I never thought—I never imagined—I quite believed—deuce take it—of course—I understood you knew—”

“*What?*”

She wheels round towards him sharply, and con-

fronts him pitilessly, never once taking her beautiful angry eyes off his shifting face and cringing figure.

"*What did you understand?*" she repeats boldly.

"You will acquit me of ever having said a word of *marriage*," replies Lord Henry Mecklington in a very low tone.

Low as it is she catches it, and it seems to strike like a sledge-hammer on her brain and make it dizzy. She sends her whirling thoughts back into the past to seize upon a sentence—a letter—a word—that was a certain declaration of his honourable intentions respecting her; and her thoughts come back confused and empty. There is no such certainty. The man has deceived her. In a moment she reads her fate.

"And what did you take me for, then?" she exclaims fiercely. "What were your intentions with regard to me?"

"I meant to make you happy," says his lordship, with as much fervour as is possible to him. "I meant to spend all my money upon you, my beautiful Stella; to surround you with every comfort, to fill your home with every luxury, and to wait upon your wishes myself, like the most faithful of your admirers and slaves."

"You meant *this* for *me*!" she says, with fixed teeth.

"What *less* could I have meant for you, my dearest

girl? More it is unfortunately not in my power to give. Not but what you are beautiful enough to grace a throne; but my birth, my family connections, my status in society—”

“And you meant *this* for *me!*” she repeats with flaming eyes.

“Come, my adorable child, there’s no need to look so fierce about it. Many a higher-born woman than yourself would be proud of such a position. You will have everything your heart can desire, Stella. You will be treated in every respect as though you were my wife. And hang it all, if I don’t think it’s the most enviable lot of the two! I shall keep back nothing from you. My carriage and horses, my servants, my—”

“Hold your tongue, you miserable old man,” cries the girl, as she sweeps past him like a whirlwind and leaves the room.

Lord Henry feels considerably upset. A lord in his own right, the patron of the Empress Theatre, and the head of half a dozen clubs, he has not been accustomed to hear himself called “a miserable old man” and told to “hold his tongue” with impunity. He is not sure whether he ought to be very much offended or very much amused; whether he shall treat the girl on her return with chilling hauteur or increased familiarity. Was she in jest or earnest? does she intend to come back, or to keep him waiting there.

for nothing? Shall he follow her, or leave the house without renewing the interview? He is terribly undecided. But one thought is uppermost—he cannot afford to lose her. So he tries to persuade himself her words meant less than they appeared to do, and that she shall ask his pardon for them yet. His self-conceit and low opinion of women help him to this decision.

“The jade is only playing off her tricks upon me now, in order to make her coming concession the more valuable,” he thinks. “Cunning little devil! She’s tried hard for honours and failed, and she doesn’t want me to see her disappointment. But she knows which side her bread is buttered as well as any. When the trap is baited with such toasted cheese as that,” he continues, glancing at the glittering bracelet on the table, “the mouse will come into it sooner or later. ‘Miserable old man,’ indeed! You shall pay for those words, my pretty Stella, before you’re many hours older, and that I swear.”

His reverie is interrupted by her return. She enters as abruptly as she departed, and with her countenance as fixed and cold. The upper portion of her skirt is gathered loosely in her hand. As she approaches the table she lowers it, and lets the contents clatter down before him. There, in a confused heap, lay the gold and jewelled bracelets; the ruby, emerald, and sapphire rings; the diamond spray; the

necklace of pearls;—all the trinkets, in fact, which from time to time the hoary old sinner has bestowed upon her, and she has accepted from him with perfect faith in what they are the forerunners.

“Why, what is this?” he exclaims with surprise as he assumes his eyeglass, through which to view the brilliant medley.

“What is it?” echoes Stella indignantly. “It is the price of your would-be purchase, my lord; but the bargain is not completed yet, and you may consider it done with.”

“But, my dear girl—” he commences.

“Don’t speak to me in those terms. Never presume to speak to me in any terms again. I will not have my name defiled by your mention of it. You have mistaken me, Lord Henry Mecklington. You have judged of my heart by your own, and this is my answer—I will have nothing more to say to you.”

“But this is madness!” says his lordship. “You will think better of it by and by. You never *could* have supposed I intended to marry you.”

“You never *could* have supposed I permitted your attentions with any other object in view,” she replies with shrill irony. “*What* should I have endured you for else? For *what*, at your instigation, dismissed my friends, arranged my plans, given up my leisure to you? Did you suppose it was—for *love*—the love that drives a woman to risk perdition for a man? Do you

think you are a likely object to excite any feeling but ambition in the breast of a woman young enough to be your daughter? No, Lord Henry; it was your title I angled for. I tell you so frankly; and as frankly do I now affirm that I would not stoop to pick it from the gutter. I always knew you for a poor, made-up, conceited fop; but I did think you were a gentleman until to-day."

"Take care, Miss Beauchamp; you may go too far!" exclaims Lord Henry, trembling with rage.

"I don't care if I do. You shall at least hear the truth whilst you can. You are not a gentleman. No gentleman would have entertained so low an opinion of a virtuous woman as you have done of me, nor sought with his trumpery wealth to buy a reputation that has never offered itself for sale."

"Do you call yourself a virtuous woman, Miss Beauchamp?" he says with quiet insolence.

"Who dares to call me otherwise?"

"I fancy you would find a good many people do so, if you chose to inquire—Tollemache, for instance, and Taunton. What did they say about it? Virtue must do more than exist, my dear; it must act. And appearances, I fear, are against you, Miss Beauchamp."

"If they are it is your dastardly conduct that has turned them so. You know I never accepted a present from you, nor accompanied you anywhere alone,

until you had given me reason to believe you intended to marry me."

"I know no such thing. I know you choose to say so now. I can only conclude, therefore, my nose has been put out of joint by a younger and probably richer man. Will it be treason to ask the name of my fortunate successor?"

"How dare you speak to me in such a tone? It is because I am alone and unprotected that you presume to do so. But I order you to leave my house, Lord Henry: here at least I will be mistress. Take up your trinkets and go. There is no room any longer for either you or them."

"I cannot refuse to obey a lady's command, of course," replies his lordship, rising to his feet; "but you must really permit me to leave these trifles behind, if only in remembrance of the pleasant days we have spent together."

"You shall not leave one. I would not touch them again if I were starving."

"But suppose I refuse to take them away?"

"I will throw them after you down the staircase."

"You had better not," he replies with a darkening face. He is becoming fairly roused now. Yet he passes the heap of jewellery without attempting to raise it in his progress to the door.

"Had I better not? You shall see!" cries Stella passionately, as she seizes article after article of the

brilliant ornaments, and dashes it upon the ground at his feet.

It is not a dignified action perhaps, but it is a very natural one. This woman has been reared in a rough-and-ready school—a school in which, if a woman cannot defend herself, she will seldom find any one to defend her—and the covert insult this man has dared to pay her has stung her to the quick, all the more perhaps because he is in a position so far above her own. So she is ready to do anything—to stick a knife into him—to fell him to the ground—to hurl his padded old figure down the stairs, that she may but ease the burning pain with which his insolence is stabbing her to the heart. And, after this, it seems but a small thing to throw his presents after him—those presents which he has made with so base a purpose. She takes a savage delight in hearing the beautiful pieces of workmanship clatter one after another against the panels of the door, and feeling they will be rendered almost useless by her violence, she wishes there were more of them, that the pleasure might be prolonged; but as the last bracelet falls from her hand, and she turns defiantly to meet Lord Henry's gaze, she is startled to see the look of malicious revenge that has gathered on his face.

"Very good, Miss Beauchamp!" he ejaculates tremblingly, as he collects the ornaments she has spurned. "Very good! you will repent this violence

before long, if I am not much mistaken!" and without another word, stuffing his pockets with the rings, brooches and bracelets, he quits the room.

Stella stands where he has left her for a few moments, panting with rage and excitement. Then, as the sound of his departing carriage-wheels strikes on her ears, and she realises the fearful mistake she has made—how she has bartered her good name, and trifled with her reputation for a prospective coronet which was never going to be offered to her; how she has wasted her time and her smiles on this wretched old man, who thought to repay her by dragging her down to the lowest depths of infamy; and how it has all ended and left her where it began, to struggle up the hilly path of fame alone—when all this disappointment and shame realises itself to her fevered imagination she bursts into an hysterical flood of tears.

Any emotion on the part of Stella Beauchamp is so unusual that the sound of her weeping alarms Miss Reed, who flies down to the drawing-room to inquire the reason.

"What is the matter?"

"Nothing. Nothing, that is to say, of consequence. I am over-tired and worried with this Richmond affair, and shall lie down till it is time to go to the theatre. Let me have a cup of strong coffee,

Fanny, and don't bother me with questions. You shall know all about it some day."

"But what is this?" says Fanny, as she stoops to recover something from the ground. "Your beautiful emerald ring, Stella—the one Lord Henry gave you the day you engaged yourself to him. And rolled right into the corner! How did you drop it? And, bless me!" she continues, as she looks at Miss Beauchamp's denuded fingers, "where are all the others gone?"

"They are where that one ought to be with them," replies Stella wearily. "If you must know the truth, Fanny, here it is—I have broken with Lord Henry, and returned his presents."

"Oh, I am so glad!" exclaims Miss Reed, inadvertently; and then observing her friend's downcast looks, she adds, "at least I am if you are, Stella."

"Oh, I'm delighted, my dear, and only hope I may never see the old mummy again. I've been sick of him for a month past, and nothing but the thought of being 'my lady' would have made me keep on so long with him."

"And you have come to the conclusion that that is not worth the sacrifice of everything else in the world," remarks Fanny timidly.

"I have come to the conclusion that I am not going to be 'my lady,' and therefore it's no use thinking anything more about it," replies Stella.

Even in her pride's extremity she will not stoop to tell an unnecessary lie. "There is some good in this woman after all beneath the crust of her vanity and worldliness and self-conceit.

Miss Reed does not accompany her to the theatre that night, and what transpires there is known only to herself. But when she returns at twelve o'clock, and walks into the little dining-room where her supper is usually prepared for her, Fanny is startled to see how ghastly white she is.

"Are you ill, Stella?" she says, starting up. "You look as pale as death!"

"I might put the same question to you. Your eyes are as red as fire. You have been crying, Fanny."

"I couldn't help it, dear; indeed I couldn't. Mrs. Marshall has been here, and they are saying such cruel things about you, Stella. It is not to be borne!"

"What things?"

"Why, about you and Lord Henry going down to Richmond together (although, as I said, what could it signify, when you were engaged to him?); and Mr. Marshall told Mrs. Marshall that Mr. Cootes was quite angry when somebody asked if Mrs. Cootes knew you, and said he wouldn't allow his wife to put her foot in your house; and young Blatchley declared that——"

"Oh, never mind what they said! Let the fools

talk!" interrupted Stella impatiently. "I have worse news than that for you, Fanny. I am dismissed from the Empress's."

"Dismissed! But why?"

"Simply because the lessee wishes it. I asked for an explanation from the manager, but I could get no other. A month's salary was handed to me in my dressing-room. I flung it back on Blackmore's desk, and demanded a satisfactory reason for the insult. I have always done my duty. I have been the making of the piece. Why was I to be dismissed at an hour's notice? Old Blackmore was very kind about it; said he was awfully sorry, and all that; that it would be very difficult to replace me; but he had no power to go against any wishes of the lessee; and that Lord Henry Mecklington's orders were that I had my dismissal, and Miss Verney, who had been under-studying me, should assume the part to-morrow. And it will be an assumption with a vengeance! Verney will make a nice hash of it; and I hope she may play to empty houses for the rest of the season."

"But *why* is it?" demands Fanny plaintively. "What have you done that Lord Henry should treat you so cruelly?"

"I have refused to be his mistress."

"*His mistress!*" screams Miss Reed, whom no amount of experience can harden to the world's iniquity. "But, oh, you wouldn't, would you? It

would be so dreadfully wrong—so immoral! People would talk so!”

“Hush! Nonsense!” says Stella, with her grand cold face, speaking as she would to a silly child. “Have I not just told you the reason of his anger is that I refused? But all this scandal spells only one word for me, Fanny, and that is—ruin!”

She drops down despondently in a chair as she speaks, and the large tears gather one by one in her eyes and roll down her marble cheeks; while Fanny Reed, unable in her consternation to think of anything to say, kneels by her side, kissing them silently away. Her companion does not refuse the caresses. It shows how completely this fresh misfortune has upset her. She is too broken down even to be impatient.

“You mustn’t say that,” sobs Miss Reed at last; “for I’m sure you’ve done nothing to deserve it. And I remember poor Amory used to say——”

“Good heavens!” cries Stella, springing from her chair, with all the old impetuosity mantling in her face, “what in the name of all that’s sacred makes you mention that man to me now? Isn’t the present misery enough, that you must begin raking up old scores that are past and done with? What can it signify what any one said or thought? Do you suppose it can alter my opinion, or make one tittle of difference to my position? As if it were not suf-

ficient—"O my God!" she cries, interrupting herself, apparently without any reason, "what have I *not* sacrificed to that brute of a man, only to find him mean enough to revenge himself upon me in so dastardly a manner!"

"Fanny," she commences in quite another tone, "never mention a man to me again. I don't want to hear the names of any of them. I wish I might never see another so long as I live. I never saw the woman yet who wasn't worth a dozen of them. So now to supper, with what appetite we may. What have you there? Stewed eels? Oh, I think I should like stewed eels; I used to be awfully fond of them when I was a child. Do you ever wish you were a child again, Fanny, with no fear but the fear of being spanked, and no joy like the joy of lollipops? It's a jolly time, if it's not a very exciting one. But excitement's no good, is it? I often think I should like to be an old woman, and live in an almshouse; they can't have much bother there, can they? Everything provided for them, and the only dissipation the district visitor's call. Would you come and see me sometimes, Fan? bring me a screw of tobacco—I shall take to smoking, I think; people say it's soothing—or a pinch of snuff."

She laughs, and looks up gaily at her friend; but Miss Reed's solemn countenance would be a check for the maddest merriment.

"Come, Fan, don't look like that. Cheer up, old girl. I know you feel anything that happens to me as much as I do—more, if one may judge by the length of your face. But don't you fret over this matter; *I* don't mean to do so. After all, what have I lost? a nasty old husband, for marrying whom I should have despised myself in a fortnight and probably bolted from in a month—and the fag-end of an engagement. Well, the first I really consider a very good riddance, and as for the second, you don't suppose, with the name I've made this season, I shall be out of work long. We'll have a holiday, Fanny. We'll go down to the sea somewhere, and enjoy ourselves, and you shall prose and moralise to me all day long, until I come back quite a reformed character. Oh, I don't mean to wear the willow, child, I can assure you of that! And with regard to the rest, these lies that they have spread concerning me, why, I'll live them down, Fanny, that's what I'll do—put my heel upon them, and live them down."

But as suddenly as she had concluded her sentence Stella falls prostrate from her chair upon the ground. Her friend runs round to her assistance. Excitement and disappointment have been too much for her. The poor child has fainted.

CHAPTER XIV.

A Fallen Star.

It is all very well for a brave-hearted woman to say she will live a scandal down, but she will live herself down first. If Methuselah were ever young and gay enough to incur one, I'd bet it cropped up against him to his dying day. The pasture-land of scandal has well been termed a hotbed, for it possesses the deadly nature of a fungus, or one of those tenacious weeds like musk or marigold, that, once planted in a favourable soil, it appears impossible completely to root up again. You may tear the old plants up by the handful, scatter the seedlings far and wide, turn the mould over two feet deep, still, when you least expect it, will you see the impudent flowers reappear; the least thing will invite them to the surface. A hot day, a shower of rain, or broken soil, and, presto! here we are again! And so it is with a tarnished reputation, a name which Scandal has touched with her polluted fingers, a woman on whom slander has breathed. She may have been only thoughtless, like Stella Beauchamp, or she may really have made a false step downwards, it is all the same to Society. Give her but the opportunity, whether from weakness of will or thought, and the seed of scandal is planted by her malicious hand, and no efforts will ever completely root it up again. The report may be con-

tradicted, the assertion denied, the future life purified and devoted to good works; it is all the same to Society! she will not let the weak will nor the weak thought be forgotten; it shall rise up in judgment against its owner even after she has ceased to think or act. The seedling has a million little roots, like the finest threads, that strike down firmly into the soil in all directions; and tear and rupture their delicate fibres as you will, leave but one particle behind, and it will be sufficient to provide flowers or toadstools for another day. Yet let not the woman who, justly or unjustly, has incurred the tainted breath of scandal sit down and weep under it, and cry that her day is over, and that she will never be able to hold up her head again. Scandal-mongers are liars, and liars are cowards, and the more you pursue them the further they retreat. You may not be able to drive them entirely away, but you can shove them pretty considerably into a corner, and make them hold their tongues until your back is turned. And then, so long as you do the right—*your* right, mind you; for to consider that Tom's right must necessarily be Jack's right is the error that makes men slaves—so long as your conscience is at rest, what does it signify *what* they say? "Be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny." Very few of us are as chaste as ice and pure as snow; and as even these innocents must suffer the malignity of the world,

who are we that we should hope or expect to escape it?

The breeders of scandal, as a rule, are not men.

Men—especially young men—speak far too lightly and openly of women in the present day; but that fact is the natural effect of the increase of social intercourse between the sexes that has obtained of late. If women crave the privilege of being intimately admitted to the society of men, they must submit occasionally to hear conversation which bears no reference to their presence. But, as a rule, men make such remarks to men only; and as a rule also they seldom make them unless they are true. The women have little opportunity, therefore, on that score of fighting shy or of cutting their female acquaintances.

And though a man may be cowardly enough to take a woman's character away, the women must indorse his statement by their treatment of her, or the shaft falls harmless. On every light word spoken by women, on every thoughtless or defiant act, there sits a self-constituted pitiless jury—I can't say an honourable jury—of over-blown matrons and dried-up spinsters; and woe be to her who has not learned to laugh at the case they bring against her, and snap her fingers at their verdict!

Speaking generally, therefore, it is by the innuendoes, the repetitions, the garbled misrepresentations of women, that women's characters are slain.

“At every breath a reputation dies;” that is, according to the value the detractors set upon their own opinions; for—merciful heavens!—were it really so, there would hardly be a virtuous woman left.

Under no circumstances, however, should we look for her in the enlightened company of the jury; for, if it be an incontrovertible fact that it is impossible to mix in the world and escape calumny, it is no less a one that the calumniators are invariably women who have had their own reputations justly blown upon.

I have never met a woman yet (and I may say that, one way or another, I have met a good many women in my passage to eternity) who *took pleasure* in decrying her fellows, who put the worst construction on their actions, and was the first to believe what she heard of them, who could not with a little trouble be proved to have slipped herself. It may have been a youthful error (I don't see why women shouldn't be entitled to their “youthful errors,” poor dears! as well as the nobler animals); it may have been “hushed up,” it may have been trampled down, but it *has been*. And the remembrance of it, the haunting ghost that will not be laid, the constantly recurring fear that, like the unburied dead and the unrooted fungi, the old story may at any moment crop up again, to depose her from the proud eminence of respectability and a right to scandalize her neighbours which time and silence and want of witnesses have bestowed upon

her, make her cowardly enough to attempt to ignore her own past by crying shame upon the present of her fellow-sinners. It takes a great deal of trouble to persuade people we are virtuous from choice rather than necessity. And what better method can we find than by appearing so shocked at the mere mention of vice, that the bystanders must perforce conclude we cannot know the taste of it?

The simple woman who sits down and cries under the verdict of Society, and the courageous woman who defies her to do her worst, suffer neither less nor more for their behaviour, excepting as they determine to suffer.

This is a hard world, and if they who encounter its knocks are not hard also, they have no alternative but to go to the wall. The best advice one can offer them is to go on their own way, looking neither to the right hand nor to the left; "to speak no slander, nay, nor listen to it," and then the chances are that they will never hear that which is spoken of themselves. The over-blown matrons and under-fed spinsters will sit on their sad case in vain, so far as they are individually concerned, and gnash their teeth with disappointed spite, when they find how powerless their ill-nature is to injure or annoy. But such enviable callousness as this is not to be attained in a day. It is necessary to receive a good many undeserved shocks before our righteous indignation ex-

hausts itself, to be replaced by a supreme contempt; and till that time arrives our sensitive natures shrink from the repeated stabs they receive, and fancy that all the world is ringing with the lie which threatens to overwhelm us with contumely.

To a woman in Stella Beauchamp's profession a tarnished reputation is an almost irretrievable loss. People are always ready to suspect that the temptations of an actress are too manifold to be resisted, and the first slur cast upon her is accepted as a natural sequence to her position. The recipient of the intelligence may say he is sorry to hear it, but he seldom says he is surprised. Stella has known all this from the beginning, and rendered herself, as she imagined, proof against it. She has never travelled anywhere without Miss Reed ready to play the spy upon all her actions. She has always been most reticent—"aughty" the supers call her—with the inferior members of her company. She has boasted of numbering none but ladies and gentlemen amongst her acquaintances. She has been wild and thoughtless, it is true, but not more than many gentlewomen, far less so than most of the higher orders; and until she consented to accompany Lord Henry Mecklington to Richmond in the character (as she thought) of his *fiancée*, she had never been in the habit of accompanying gentlemen anywhere alone. To find, therefore, so suddenly and indisputably, that she has given grave cause for slan-

der, and lost the proud position she has hitherto maintained, is a severe blow to her. At any other time to have been dismissed from the Empress would have nearly broken her heart; but to know that the worst possible construction will be put upon that dismissal—that Lord Henry, who swore she should repent her treatment of him, will be certain to attribute any cause but the right one for his desire to get rid of her, and that anything she can do or say will be powerless, taken as evidence, against the word of a patron and an aristocrat—crushes her proud spirit to the earth. She tries to brave it out, but it is of no use. Not many days elapse before she cries out to Fanny Reed that life is becoming unendurable to her, and she must leave town at once. So they go down to Brighton together, and settle themselves in private rooms at the Norfolk Hotel, where they can remain as secluded as they like.

Stella Beauchamp mopes terribly. At first Miss Reed thinks it is the natural reaction of her rage and disappointment; but as day succeeds day, and she still refuses to walk on the pier or the esplanade—to go out anywhere, in fact, except for an occasional hurried stroll by herself late at night or early in the morning—her friend begins to suspect there is more the matter with her than appears upon the surface. She has a dull time of it, I am afraid, poor Fanny Reed. Stella

is not a woman to impart confidence or to accept pity. After the first outburst she remains silent as to the reason of her distress, but it tells on her terribly—on her temper and her health. She grows gloomy and fractious, she looks pale and pinched, and she studiously avoids company. The most painful state of mind a woman can endure is gaining on her. She is becoming ashamed of being met, or spoken to, or seen.

Fanny has to make her daily pilgrimages about the town by herself, and often, after having first vainly entreated Stella to join her in her walk, returns to the hotel, to find that she has gone out during her absence, without leaving word of where she is bound, or the probable time she will be away.

It is provoking, but Fanny has to bear it, as she has had to bear many things from her wayward companion before. Some people seem born into this world for the express purpose of being "put upon."

One week-day evening, when Miss Reed has left her to attend church, Stella, according to her present custom, seizes her hat, ties a thick veil over her face, and rushes into the open air. She has not stirred out of the house all that day, and the August weather has been most oppressive. Yet she will not join the large company assembled on the esplanade to inhale the fresh breezes from the sea, but turns hastily up a by-

street to cross the Western-road, and gain the more secluded quarter of Prestonville. As she does so she passes several shops, outside which large posters are displayed on boards. It is nine o'clock, the lamps are already lighted, and the gas flares upon the red and blue letters. With theatrical instinct she turns her eyes upon them (for there is no profession in which the members take so much interest in each other's failings and successes as in the theatrical profession), and reads in large capitals, which bespeak his marketable value, the name of Amor Carrington. The sight is so sudden, and in that place so unexpected, that it turns her sick. The remembrances fraught with that name are so humbling and self-reproachful, that her great object lately has been to drive it as much as possible from her thoughts. She has even gone the length of avoiding that side of the newspaper on which she knows, day by day, it is advertised. She would like, if it were possible, to cut out that portion of her mind on which is inscribed the names of Leadstone and Carrington for ever. But one of the penalties attendant on our wrong actions is that we are not permitted to forget them; and so the memory of the young tenor has been constantly recurring to her ever since she drove him from her presence, although she has never acknowledged it. And now his name stares at her from this hoarding, as though he had sprung up in the darkness to reproach her with her cruelty.

She would rather pass it, but she is fascinated by the very letters of which it is composed. So she stops, with a fast-beating heart, and reads:

THEATRE ROYAL, BRIGHTON.

Great Attraction!

Positively for Six Nights only.

The Great London Tenor,

MR. AMOR CARRINGTON, &c. &c.

There is a great deal more upon the play-bill, but that is enough for Stella Beauchamp. At the Theatre Royal, Brighton! He is then close to her, and she did not know it. When she comes to think of it, that is hardly to be wondered at, considering that she has refused to look at a paper, or to go anywhere, or to listen to any news that Fanny may have to tell her, since her arrival in the town. But her self-accusing conscience makes a great deal out of the circumstance. Has he followed her on purpose? That is her first idea. Does he believe, in common with the rest, what the world has said of her, and come here to gloat upon her misery and her downfall?

O silly Stella! to torture yourself with absurd out-of-the-way fancies like these, which a moment's quiet reasoning would show you to be utter folly.

And yet not more silly than any woman in love against her will with a man whom she has taught to despise her. She stands gazing at the announcement of the "Great London Tenor, Mr. Amor Carrington,"

as though she could not take her eyes away from it; and even then cannot resist a smile at the remembrance of her own prophecy respecting his success and her pride in its achievement, and wonders sadly, but very quietly, whether he ever thinks of it too, and regrets that one portion of it at least she has taken care that he shall never see.

She turns away from the advertisement at last with a deep sigh, and prepares to cross the road. A man stands at the corner of the streets distributing what appear to be cards to the passing passengers, and mechanically she takes one from him and holds it in her hand, and thinks no more about it.

Indeed her mind is too full of Amor Carrington to think of anything else. As she toils up the steep dark hill that leads out of the town she reviews her whole acquaintance with the young tenor, from the first glance he gave her on the stage of the Leadstone Theatre to the last reproachful look with which he left her drawing-room on the night he nearly murdered her aristocratic lover. Does she blame him for that righteous blow now, I wonder? I don't know that she even thinks of it. She is dwelling on the little scene behind the window-curtains before the entrance of Lord Henry Mecklington, when Amor Carrington touched her neck, and she had felt his fingers tremble, and seen his cheeks flush, and all her soul had rushed to her lips in that one word "*love.*"

She wonders if *he* ever thinks of it. As she does, and of the humiliating scene by which it was succeeded, the tears well into her eyes and roll slowly down her face beneath her veil.

Proud Stella Beauchamp crying, and at the thought of a discarded lover! She hardly knows herself under such an aspect. She is ashamed of it, even though she is alone and in the dark, and she rubs the unwelcome tears roughly away with her handkerchief, and turns homewards again with a determination to take no more solitary walks if they are to result in such nonsense as this.

Fanny has not yet returned from her church, and Stella enters her bedroom alone. The gas is burning brightly over the mirror, and the first thing she places on the toilet-table preparatory to disrobing herself is the card she still holds in her hand. To her surprise it is a photograph; to her still greater surprise it is *his*! She seizes and examines it. On the reverse side is printed his name, with a list of the parts in which he is to perform at Brighton; the portrait represents him in the character of Manrico in the *Trovatore*—a style of advertisement too expensive to be general even to this day, and one which is entirely new to her. Stella holds the photograph in both hands under the light and examines it attentively. How handsome he looks in the becoming costume! What a splendid figure he has! What large expressive eyes! And his

smile! The photographer has been most happy in catching the best expression of Carrington's face. How often has she seen him smile just like that when she has said anything saucy to him! Such a pretty smile it is, so tender and so arch, and yet with so much firmness in it. He used to look just like that at her. And before she knows what she is doing, Stella has pressed the portrait to her lips. The action recalls her to herself. She bursts into tears. Oh, why—why did she ever make such a terrible mistake as to crucify her own feelings with respect to this man, and—for what? *What* must he think of her now? How he must despise her! She, whom he would always persist in considering—despite her own denial of the fact—so good and pure and true. He would let her deny it now fast enough. He would not even listen to her, were she to attempt to prove that it were otherwise. She must have sunk lower than the dirt beneath his feet in his esteem.

She dries her eyes and washes away all trace of her emotion before Fanny returns to, delight her with an account of the choral service, and to dish up a small wishy-washy *résumé* of the sermon during supper-time; but that portrait goes to bed with Stella Beauchamp that night, and is gazed at again with the first dawn of morning's light. Alas for woman's weakness! Amor Carrington is out of her reach now, or so she imagines, and he is becoming all the more precious

for the height at which he is hung. She thinks over the various little episodes in their brief love-making—the moonlight drives in Leadstone, the conversations with clasped hands upon the sofa, the last long look at the railway station—till she becomes sick with longing to see her country lover again, and hear from his own lips what he thinks of her. It will be easier to bear, she says, when she knows *the very worst*. She would like to hear him say everything that is bad, to call her names, to reproach her for her falsehood, to declare he hates and despises her, and then it will be over. Such is her logical argument. Everything will be finished between them, and they can follow their professions without even clashing with each other. She will go on her provincial tour as usual (it commences in a month), and Carrington will be singing here, there, and everywhere; and if they chance to meet they needn't speak to one another. And then he will marry, of course; he makes lots of money as it is, and is sure to find plenty of girls ready to jump at him—bold-faced things that they are! And she—well, she is scarcely likely to make a fool of herself a second time; and if she were, it is hardly probable any man will be found willing to make a fool of himself for her sake, after the pleasant reports that have been spread about her. Nor would she permit any such nonsense again. Life is too short for fooling, and the only object worth pursuing in it that she can

see is to make sufficient money to smooth one's passage to the grave. And after all she dares to say she will not live long to bother herself or any one else. Her mother died of consumption, and she always has a horrid cough in winter.

She has but to leave off her flannel wraps, and the thing is done.

But, before that happens she *must* have it out with Amor Carrington.

This kind of suspense, as to whether he hates or despises her most, is too hard to bear.

CHAPTER XV.

A Heart to the Rescue.

BUT the sly little puss does not confide these aspirations to Fanny Reed. That lady knows all about Mr. Carrington being in the town, but dares not mention the fact for fear of an outburst, and lives in hourly dread lest Stella should discover it for herself. There is no need for her fears. Her companion would sooner do anything than take her into her confidence. Not that Stella is playing anything of a double or artificial game now. The poor little woman's spirit is too completely broken for that. She truly and thoroughly believes that all is over between Amor Carrington and herself, that he can feel nothing but the utmost contempt for her conduct, and that if they

meet at all it will be that she may hear him reproach her for her infidelity and cruelty towards him.

But as soon as she knows that he is in the same town, a fierce longing takes possession of her to see him again, if only at a distance; to look at those eyes which used to gaze so tenderly in hers, and guess if she can, by the way in which they turn on others, whether he has entirely got over the pain she knows she made him feel.

The idea grows and gets control over her, until she determines that, cost what it may, she will go to the theatre and hear him sing; and the first evening that Miss Reed leaves her alone, she puts on her bonnet and sneaks out by herself.

This is not the way in which the great Miss Beauchamp has been used to go to the play; but she will not change her dress nor order a carriage for fear of attracting attention, but having disguised herself as much as possible, walks up to the box-entrance, and buys a ticket for the dress-circle. There—seated in the third or fourth row, well back from observation—she watches the play with breathless attention. It is capitally put upon the stage (as every piece has been at the Brighton Theatre of late years), but the capabilities of the company are nothing to her. From the moment she enters the theatre to the moment she quits it, her eyes are fixed but upon one object, her ears drink in but one sound—the form and the voice

of Amor Carrington. She sees nothing else, and hears nothing else; and when at last the curtain falls and the hero of the evening is called before it to receive the plaudits of the audience, she fancies that his eyes meet hers, and feels ready to sink into the earth. He disappears. She falls into a reverie, whilst the tears stand on her cheek. The occupants of the dress-circle file out one by one, regarding her curiously. She looks so beautiful as she sits there, pale and tearful, in her plain morning-dress. At last she recalls herself, and starts to her feet. Yet she leaves the place lingeringly. Oh, if she could but see him once more, and ask him to forgive her! But she can never, never write to him again! He would return her letter unopened. She walks into the open air, and the sudden change makes her feel confused and dizzy. As she gains the Marine Parade she sits down upon a bench. She will rest there for a little while, she thinks, and then if Fanny asks where she has been, she can say with truth, "Sitting by the sea." Everybody does it these warm August evenings.

But Stella forgets that it is rather late to be sitting by the sea, and that the Marine Parade at Brighton is not the safest place in which a pretty woman can sit unprotected at past eleven o'clock at night. A group of men lounge past her presently—half-and-half fellows, without the breeding of gentlemen or the humility of the lower orders. They stare at her veiled

face inquisitively, and then return and lean on the railings opposite. In another minute one of them has taken a seat beside her and spoken; and, alarmed and indignant, she jumps up, to find herself surrounded by the whole group.

They close in about her, laughing at her remonstrances, and pretending to imitate her evident fear.

Stella Beauchamp's heart almost stops beating. She looks up and down the esplanade. All is dark and deserted—not even a policeman in sight. She tries to elbow her way out of the odious crowd, and is repulsed. Then she screams shrilly, and immediately somebody runs across the road to her rescue. A tall figure separates the group of vulgar roysterers, who slink off as such cowards always do directly they find their master. The stranger makes his way up to Stella, who has sunk trembling on the bench again.

“I am afraid those fellows have been frightening you. Were they rude? Will you give them in charge? What can I do for you?”

She has recognised his voice at once, and the sound of it frightens her far more than the manner of the men did. She dare not answer. She does not know what to say.

“You are not hurt?” he enquires, as she turns from him. “They did not dare to touch you?”

“No,” she answers faintly.

"May I see you home? Where do you live?"

"Get a fly," she whispers. But Carrington hears the tone too well.

"Good God," he exclaims; "it is not possible!" And then in an agitated voice, "Miss Beauchamp, is it you? How did you come here? Tell me, for Heaven's sake, did either of those brutes touch you?"

"Oh, no; I was only alarmed. I am foolish to have stayed out so late. Please call a fly. That is all."

He looks at her for a moment, all the concentrated agony of the past gleaming in his eyes, then he heaves a deep sigh and turns away. In another minute he is at her side again, and the cab is waiting to take her home. She tries to thank him, but the words die on her tongue. She rises hastily and turns towards the vehicle. He holds the door open as she gets in.

"Where shall I tell him to drive to?" he says in a low voice.

"The Norfolk—I am staying there."

"Good-evening."

He raises his hat, shuts the door, and gives his orders to the flyman.

The wheels have just begun to turn when a sudden impulse seizes her. She cannot leave him there alone, without one word of thanks. She puts her head out of the window, and cries, "Stop!" Then

says to Carrington hurriedly, "Will you come home with me?"

"I would rather not, Miss Beauchamp."

"But I am frightened—I am ill. It is unkind of you," she says with a half sob.

"If I can be of any use, of course I will come," he answers, as he unfastens the door and takes a seat on the opposite side of the carriage.

Then she is miserable, and wishes she had not done it. She wants to speak to him, but the memory of the past overwhelms her, and she feels she has no right. They sit in darkness and silence together till they reach the hotel. She knows then that he will go; that as soon as he has delivered her into safe keeping he will take his departure, without a word of reproach or explanation. And that she feels she could not bear: her state would be infinitely worse than it was before. So as they pull up at the door of the hotel she asks timidly—

"Will you come upstairs with me?"

His answer is the same as before:

"I would rather not, Miss Beauchamp."

"But you must—you shall!" she returns almost hysterically. "I must speak to you! Do for God's sake, Amor!"

That word decides him. Where would he not follow her to hear it spoken?

They enter the sitting-room together. It is empty,

save for themselves. As Stella stands under the light, he is shocked to see how pale and worn she has become.

"You have been ill," he says with concern.

"Ill!" she exclaims, throwing off her bonnet and veil. "Not I; but worried—frightfully worried. You have heard everything, Mr. Carrington, I suppose?"

"What do you mean by everything?"

"That I was discharged from the Empress."

"Yes; I heard that."

"And the reason of it?"

"No."

"Haven't you heard the reports about me and Lord Henry Mecklington?"

She looks at him defiantly as she speaks, but his face is turned away.

"Tell me the truth. Have you not heard them?"

He groans.

"O Stella, don't ask me. If you knew what I felt on hearing them!"

"You believe them, then?"

He does not answer.

"You believe I liked the man? You believe I could be so base—so fallen—as to—— But what's the use of asking? Of course every one believes it. Did I not give them ample occasion to do so? It is my just reward."

"Stella," says Carrington quickly as he comes to—

wards her, "for the sake of what passed between us, tell me the truth. I know now that you never loved me, but I think at one time you fancied you did, my dear; and, for the sake of the foolish hope that fancy raised in me, tell me the truth now—are there any grounds for that horrid slander?"

"Oh, plenty!"

At these words his face looks the picture of misery.

"Look here, Carrington. I'm wretched enough, God knows, but I'm not going to make myself out better than I am—to you. I flirted with Lord Henry Mecklington to any extent; I accepted his presents; I let him kiss me and call me all manner of fond names; I accompanied him wherever he chose to take me. On one occasion, owing to his lordship being too tipsy to drive me home again, I stayed out a whole night with him at Richmond. But I thought he considered himself engaged to me. I fully imagined the old wretch intended to make me Lady Henry Mecklington, or I would have seen him at the bottom of the sea before I would have suffered his odious familiarities. It was all my cursed ambition, you see, and love of money. It has brought a bitter retribution with it."

"And is that all?" demands Carrington.

"All! Good heavens! What would you have more? Isn't it enough that my lips have been pol-

luted by his touch? That my fair name has been lightly handled? That I have lost both reputation and position for his sake? It has been my ruin, Carrington. When the man found I was too proud to accept his benefits without his title—”

“Say too honourable, too pure, too good, Miss Beauchamp,” he interrupts her.

“I shall say no such thing. How can the woman who would have exchanged love and self-respect for an empty title be good, or honourable, or pure? You must learn to call things by their right names, Carrington. The vilest creature who does wrong for the sake of earning her living is a better woman than I was. I see that plainly now.”

“But you loved no one else, Stella?”

She reddens, but she does not answer the question. She only goes on very quickly.

“When Lord Henry found he had gone too far even for me, he took his revenge by robbing me at the same moment of my situation and my good name. I am done for, Carrington!”

“You must not say that. Your whole life is a contradiction of such vile slander. You will live it down.”

“So I said at first, but it is a delusion. I shall never live it down. I am too public a character. It will be talked of after I am in my grave.”

“Indeed, you exaggerate the matter.”

"The proof of the pudding, Carrington, is in the eating. Wait and see. Who would live it down with me? Who would take my hand at the present moment, and stake his life upon its stainlessness? Not one."

"I would!" cries the man, passionately.

"You?"

"Yes, I. Who has a better right? I have seen something of the inner working of your spirit, Stella," he continues in a softer tongue, "although I was so foolish as to misinterpret it, and I would stake my honour (which is far more to me than my life) upon its purity and true womanliness."

She leans one hand upon the table as though to support herself, and places the other on her throbbing heart.

"Oh, stop; pray stop! Don't speak to me like that. You stab me to the soul. I went to the theatre to-night, Carrington, I went there expressly to see you—to try to speak to you—to tell you how I have suffered for my conduct towards you—to ask you to forgive me if you can."

"My dear child, there is nothing to forgive," he says tenderly, as he comes towards her. But she waves him off.

"When I said that night," she continues, determined to accuse herself to the uttermost, "that you had come to my house without an invitation, I lied,

and you knew it. It was my cowardice made me tell that lie. Lord Henry was jealous of you, and said either one or the other must leave the house. I was afraid if I offended him I should lose everything; so I sacrificed you. But I have never forgiven myself for it."

"My poor girl, you acted on the impulse of the moment. Don't blame yourself too much for it. It is over now. Try and forget it, as I do."

Her features work convulsively. She can hardly whisper the words.

"Oh, *do* say you forgive me!"

There is no mistaking the anguish of her voice. Amor Carrington comes quite close to her then; he even puts his arms about her.

"I do forgive you, Stella. Will you tell me one thing in return? That the name you called me that evening behind the curtain was not a feigned one—that, at the time, you *felt* as well as said it?"

"Oh, I did—I did!" she sobbed. "But you have had your revenge, Amor. It has brought its own punishment. The sound of it has never left my ears since."

"And will you say it again—*darling*?"

She looks half frightened.

"But to what avail? Have you forgotten what they say I am—what they say that I have done? O Amor, I am no longer what I was at Leadstone. I

was bad enough then, Heaven knows; but they had not dared to talk about me as they do now. I overheard a man at Richmond say that day that all the world knew I had not a shred of reputation left."

"I should like to meet that man and ask him to repeat his lie," says Carrington, with closed lips. "But that has nothing to do with us. Child, do you love me now? Can you say it from your very heart?"

"Oh, I do, I do—God knows I do!"

"Then you are mine, and I am yours. How soon will you marry me?"

"Amor, I am not worthy."

"Stella, I will not have you speak such words to me. From the moment I first saw you at Leadstone I worshipped you. I do not deny that you bitterly wounded me. I could not have loved you as I do and been indifferent to your conduct. But this hour makes amends for all. And had you really fallen, my darling—had you really been untrue to your sweet nature, and mistaken the lust of gain for a loftier ambition—still would I have been grateful to know that your heart had discovered its home at last, and to be the means of binding up your broken spirit, and restoring you to happiness and contentment again. Be my wife, dear Stella. I know that in many respects you will be the loser; but I have the will and the means to work for you to your life's end, and a

heart that will be your own to all eternity. Answer me," he goes on passionately, as he presses towards her; "if I am good enough for you to love, am I good enough for you to marry? Can you forget my country breeding, my country manners, and think only of the love that is yours for ever?"

She answers him by falling at his feet.

"Not there, Stella. Not there, my dearest," he says most tenderly, as he raises her beautiful form and supports it in his arms. "Never lower than my breast darling—never lower than my heart. Here is your home, my star, from this time henceforward and for evermore!"

AN UTTER IMPOSSIBILITY.

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It was a Sunday afternoon in August—the time of all others when it is to be hoped that the recording angel is lenient towards frail human nature for feeling more sleepy than religious. Inside the whitewashed country church was all sunshine, laughter, and heat; whilst the familiar form of the clergyman was becoming more and more indistinct to the heavy eyes which strove to look at him; and the dull ears, straining to listen, could hardly distinguish the monotonous hum of his voice from the buzz of the insects which had found their way into the sacred building. Of all the congregation, indeed, there seemed to be but one cool, collected, and watchful person, and that one was a woman.

A delicate-looking woman, of about five or six and twenty, with a face that would grow very dear and very necessary to such as loved it; a quiet thoughtful face, with sympathetic eyes, and a tenderly-curved mouth, the smile of which was all the sweeter because it came so seldom. Robed in half-mourning, she sat in her pew alone, neither increasing the heat of her

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A delicate-looking woman, of about five or six and twenty, with a face that would grow very dear and very necessary to such as loved it; a quiet thoughtful face, with sympathetic eyes, and a tenderly-curved mouth, the smile of which was all the sweeter because it came so seldom. Robed in half-mourning, she sat in her pew alone, neither increasing the heat of her-

self and her neighbours by violent fanning and scattering of scent, nor disordering her appearance by taking off her gloves or loosening her bonnet-strings; but remained calm and composed, making others cooler only to look at her. On the wall above the seat she occupied was a marble tablet, the gold-and-black letters of which set forth that it had been erected to the memory of John Hilton, Esquire, of Brooklands, in the parish of Hurstley, and of his daughter Edith, aged two years, whose deaths had occurred within a few months of each other, and whose bodies lay in the adjoining churchyard. As the service concluded, and the lady, rising from her seat, caught for a moment the name of Edith on the stone before her, a slight shudder ran through her frame, and a close observer might have seen her lip tremble; but the next minute she had sunk upon her knees, and hidden her face and her feelings from the gaze of man; and when she again resumed her seat, her look was as peaceful as before. But she seemed in no hurry to quit the church; for the crowd of men and women, old and young, fat and thin, had pushed each other down the aisle, and scattered far and wide, before her grey-silk dress swept the length of coconut matting, and appeared in the square old-fashioned porch. But as she entered it, a start, a flush on her pale cheek, and a look of intense pleasure lighting up her eyes, showed that she had encountered a welcome

surprise; and with an outstretched hand she advanced quickly to meet the figure of a gentleman, evidently waiting for her.

"*You* here, Charley, after so many promises and so many delays! Why, what induced you to come to-day?"

Her words intimated that Sunday was not the day he should have chosen for his journey; but her looks said she was only too glad to see him there at all.

"I arrived in town yesterday," he replied, warmly returning the pressure of her hand; "and you know how I hate a Sunday in London, Beatrice; so I thought I would come on and spend it here. Besides, I want to speak to you."

He was a dark handsome man, of about her own age, and usually appeared younger; but at the present moment there was an expression of perplexity or pain (it would have been difficult to decide which) upon his face, that caused him to look the elder of the two. Yet, strange to say, the lady did not appear to notice the perturbation of his features, and her answer to his remark was given lightly.

"You don't want any more good advice, I hope, Charley, because you know you never take it; so it is only adding insult to injury to ask for it."

"Come, that's hardly fair, Beatrice," he answered seriously; "I am sure I have always followed your advice when it was feasible, and been grateful for it

when it was not. Your counsel and your sisterly affection have been the guiding-stars of my existence, and I was not aware that I had shown myself unmindful of them."

There appeared to be something in this last remark which grated on the lady's feelings; for her playful tone was quelled at once.

"My dear Charley, I was only joking! You know how ready I always am to give you the help of which I am capable. What is it that you wish to speak to me about?"

They had passed out of the church-porch by this time, and she had turned into the path which led towards her home. But Charles Lennox placed his hand upon her arm, and detained her.

"Stop, Beatrice! Don't go home just yet; it is cooler now. Let us take a little turn together in the churchyard."

"In the churchyard, Charley?" she asked with surprise.

"Yes, in the churchyard," he repeated; "why not? I like to wander sometimes amongst the graves; they seem so quiet and so peaceful; besides, I think I should like to tell you what I have to tell you—here."

She placed her arm within his as he spoke, and they turned towards the back of the church, and sauntered together down the narrow gravel-path which

bordered the resting-places of the dead. For a few minutes they walked in silence; his heart seemed to be full, and hers was pondering on the coming revelation. When at last he spoke, he did it so abruptly, that his words seemed almost rough.

"Beatrice, I am going to be married."

"*Charley!*"

The arm linked within his slid suddenly from his hold, and the face she turned towards him bore a sickly incredulous smile.

"It is true," he answered with attempted unconcern, as he feigned to busy himself by flicking specks of dust off his attire with his cane. "I met her six weeks ago at the country-house at which I have been staying; and as soon as ever it was a settled thing, I ran down here, feeling not only that you have a kind of right to the first news, but that I should not feel quite happy or satisfied with myself until I had received your congratulations and approval."

"Thank you, Charley," she answered, in a voice which she hated for sounding so full of pain, and with lips which she despised for being so weak as to tremble. And then, when she had expressed her thanks for his consideration, it seemed as though neither of them could find anything more to say on the subject; for they continued to walk side by side, but in complete silence.

For she could not congratulate her friend—not just yet; and she knew she had no right to reproach him, or even to feel hurt at his intelligence. For, many years before, a terrible scene had taken place between this man and this woman. They had fought a battle together—such a battle as is often fought in this world in secret and in tears; and they had achieved a victory, though not a bloodless one. Years before, when Beatrice Hilton had been a wife and mother, she had discovered to her horror, misery, and shame, that her heart was no longer loyal to its rightful master, but had slipped, almost insensibly to herself, into the keeping of Charles Lennox. And then, when he had guessed her secret, and, emboldened by the fact, had dared to whisper that her affection for him was reciprocated, she had told him they must part for ever. She had put away the temptation of his love, so dear to her; had turned a deaf ear to his entreaties, and bravely and resolutely torn herself away from the dangerous pleasure of his companionship. But though she had done all this, she had not satisfied her uneasy conscience. She was not able, all at once, to wrench the unhallowed love from her repentant heart; and when the discovery of this fact was quickly followed by the deaths of her husband and her child, Beatrice Hilton had permitted remorse to take such strong possession of her breast, that she refused to believe it could be right to indulge her affection for Charles

Lennox, even though she had become free. She thought that refraining from the happiness within her grasp was some sort of expiation for having rashly desired to pluck that which was unlawful; and therefore, when Mr. Lennox, as soon after her bereavement as he thought proper, had urged her to become his wife, she had given him what would have appeared to any one but lovers a decided refusal, and affirmed she should content herself with friendship for him until her life ended. But then she had always had him for her friend—her close, intimate, inalienable friend; and whilst she adhered to her resolution of becoming nothing nearer to him, Mrs. Hilton had inwardly gloried in the knowledge that no other woman came between them.

Mr. Lennox being, on the strength of an independent income and an expected baronetcy, that social evil—an idle man, was a gentleman much addicted to getting into all manner of scrapes, except pecuniary ones; and whenever he was in need of counsel or sympathy, he had been in the habit of going straight to Beatrice Hilton for the aid which she loved to give him. Had she been called upon to analyse her feelings in the matter, she would hardly have maintained that she expected this pleasant brother-and-sisterly sort of intercourse to go on for ever; yet it is equally true that she never anticipated its being cut short by marriage with any one, unless, indeed, it were herself.

Her first impulse, therefore, on the receipt of Charles Lennox's intelligence, was, that it must be untrue; her second, to reproach him with his perfidy; her third to remember that she had refused to be his wife, and thereby resigned all right to question his proceedings; her last, to wonder why he had chosen to tell her of it there.

Why had he led her down the very path beside which lay the bodies of her husband and her child? why regulated his words so, that at the same moment the news of his intended marriage left his lips, the sacred name of "Edith" gleamed on her from the small white cross before them, and her eyes were resting on the summer flowers which decked her darling's grave?

Had he been doubtful with what feelings she might receive his intelligence—fearful lest in the privacy of her own home she might have been betrayed into words which it would have been like sacrilege to utter beside that sacred spot? At the mere thought, a woman's pride began to surge and swell in Beatrice Hilton's breast, and the tone in which she replied to Mr. Lennox's next remark was masterly in its acted unconcern.

"I have taken you by surprise, Beatrice," he observed.

"Not at all, Charley, except so far as the imme-

diate fact is concerned. I only wonder," with a light laugh, "you did not tell me of it long ago. Of course, I knew you would marry some day, and have often tried to picture your future wife to myself. I shall be curious to know if your *fiancée* comes up to my ideal. You must tell me all about her, and begin at the beginning. What is her name?"

"Well, her name is Miss Ashton—Louisa Ashton," replied Charles Lennox; who, although he was very much taken with his new fancy, would rather his old love had betrayed a little more concern at the news.

"Ashton! what, the Devonshire family?"

"Yes; she is a niece of the old judge."

"Very pretty, I suppose, Charley?"

"O yes, she's decidedly pretty."

"Quite your own style, I conclude: fair hair and blue eyes, like that charming little actress we saw at the Strand together last year, and of whose beauty you raved for three months afterwards."

"Three days, or three hours more likely," replied Mr. Lennox unresponsively; "I don't think I'm much given to raving, Beatrice; I'm getting rather too old for that sort of thing now, to say nothing of the circumstances of my life having been calculated to knock all such nonsense out of me."

She knew that he alluded to the former episode of their unhappy love, of which he often spoke in like

manner, and which for some years had been the means of making him very wild. For the first time a mighty doubt assailed her heart, as to whether she had been justified in refusing to heal the wound she had inflicted: but the next moment she remembered that to think of that it was too late. She had driven him to another for comfort, and thenceforth she must be less to him than she had ever been before. A spasm passed over her face as the thought crossed her mind; but though she had so little power over her features, she had sufficient control over her voice to continue the conversation easily.

"You have not yet described Miss Ashton to me, Charley."

"Well, she is fair, then, as you anticipated; rather *mignonne*, and very young; too young for me, in truth, for she has only just completed her seventeenth year."

Another pang for the suffering creature by his side; for what circumstance can a woman, who has passed her *première jeunesse*, feel more than the fact of her lover bestowing his affections on a girl more than half-a-dozen years younger than herself?

"She is very fond of you, Charley?" was the next interrogation, whispered rather than said.

"O yes, I believe so, indeed I am quite sure of it," was the answer, while a smile of secret self-satis-

faction stole over the features of Charles Lennox, and he pulled down the ends of his heavy moustaches caressingly.

"And you love her, of course?"

"Of course, or I shouldn't think of marrying her; that is to say, she is a very charming little creature, Beatrice, and very much attached to myself; but if you imagine I can regard her, or any woman, with a tithe of the affection which we——"

"Hush! O hush!" said Mrs. Hilton, earnestly, as she raised her hand. "That is past, Charley; please don't allude to it."

"I know it's past," he answered ruefully; "you've given me good reason to believe that, Beatrice; but I was not aware that the mere mention of it was so distasteful to you."

"It is as well not to speak of it, and especially now," she said gently, pressing her hand over her heart meanwhile, to deaden its pain. "When are you to be married, Charley?"

"In a month," he answered rather sullenly.

He was by no means aware that he regretted what he had done; that he was sorry that from flirting for mere pastime he had been led on into making a declaration of marriage; but it was very patent to him that if the coming change in his circumstances made any change in his friendship with

Beatrice Hilton, the game would not be worth the candle. He wished, or he thought he wished, since the other had refused him, to marry pretty Louisa Ashton, with her ravishing white skin and melting blue eyes; but he had no idea of not retaining his old flame in the character of chief friend, adviser, and confidante. She had been too much to him for too many years past, to enable him to dispense easily with her now. In all his late thoughts respecting the future, he had pictured to himself these two women associating with and loving one another; the youthful beauty and innocence of Louisa setting off Beatrice's maturer grace and power of intellect, and both of them trying to show affection for himself.

In pondering on his lot as the husband of Louisa Ashton, he had yet never failed to think of Beatrice Hilton as his chief good. Louisa was to be his Pleasure, beaming with loveliness and wreathed in constant smiles; but the other woman was to be his Comfort, the one to whom he brought all his troubles, and from whom alone he expected to derive their balm. And mingled with this steady friendship was to have been a spice of the old leaven—nothing deleterious to his marital faith, but just sufficient to infuse a little excitement and interest to his bond with Beatrice. An occasional sigh for the past, perhaps; a stray allusion to the hopes *that were*; the bliss that *might have been*; and through her eyes, or the pressure

of her hand, to receive the assurance that regret sometimes claimed her also for its own.

Charles Lennox had purposed for himself, in fact, an utter impossibility: to keep a sentimental friendship, bordering on love, alight in the bosom of one woman; whilst he took another, a younger and a fairer one, to his arms. In some friendships we must be all—or nothing. When he spoke sullenly on the subject of his approaching marriage, it was not therefore at the thought of what was before him, but because Mrs. Hilton declined to discuss that which was to be left behind. For some time after her last remark they again preserved silence, during which period Mr. Lennox employed himself in switching off the heads of the nettles and other weeds which grew amongst the grass. Then he said, in a tone of disappointment:

“I expected more sympathy from you, Beatrice.”

“More sympathy, Charley! in what way?” she demanded, raising her weary eyes to his face.

“Well, I thought that, considering all things, you would be glad to hear that at last I had a chance of happiness, in so far as the prospect of a wife and home of my own can give it me.”

“And O, Charley, you cannot think that I am *not* glad—as glad as I should be at anything which promoted your welfare!”

“I thought that you would sympathise more with

my feelings in the matter, considering what a friend you have been to me. You will always be my friend, Beatrice, will you not?"

"Always. I have promised it again and again."

"And will love my wife for my sake?"

"I hope so; no less than for her own. And I rejoice in every good thing which happens to you, dear friend; and shall pray night and morning that your wife may prove so great a blessing to you, that you may never remember there was a time when life was otherwise than happy. Can I say more?"

He shook his head with a pleased smile, and then he took her hand, and pressed it, and thanked her warmly for all that she had done for him, and promised still to do.

"But, Beatrice, there are tears upon your cheek! That hardly looks as if you thought my news was good news."

She had been fighting hard with these rebellious tears for several minutes past, yet they had conquered her; and now, as she shook them indignantly away, crimsoning beneath the knowledge that they had met his observation, the effort to appear altogether indifferent was too much for her, and in another moment she had broken down entirely.

"You should not have brought me by my baby's grave, if you wished me to be cheerful," she sobbed, blushing for the subterfuge she was compelled to use,

to allay his consternation at her tears. O, my poor Edith, my poor dead baby! How I wish I were at rest with her!"

"I am so sorry," stammered Mr. Lennox. "I never thought—I quite forgot—what a careless fool you must think me, Beatrice! Poor dear little Edith! Of course I should not have brought you here. Let us go out by the farther gate; it is a longer way home, but we shall avoid passing by the grave again. I almost hoped you had overcome that grief, dear Béatrice; that you had gained courage to confess that the child has made a good exchange."

"O yes! I do—I know it," sighed the mother; "but, Charley, you do not, you cannot understand all that I feel." And when she reached Brooklands she cried for little Edith (if it were for little Edith that she cried) through the whole of the ensuing night.

Although at any moment he might have returned to Miss Ashton and her fascinations, Mr. Lennox did not appear disposed to quit Hurstley in a hurry; but lingered in the neighbourhood, having his apartments at the village inn, and spending most of his time about the house and grounds of Brooklands. After a few days, the reason of this conduct on his part became apparent.

"Where are you likely to settle after your marriage?" demanded Mrs. Hilton of him, after he had been torturing her for the best part of an hour by

discussions on the subject of curtains and carpets, and the relative merits of walnut and rosewood. For although Mr. Lennox had plenty of money, he had no fixed habitation. He was waiting to inherit that with the baronetcy.

"What do you think of Moorcroft?" he inquired, with a meaning smile. "I have already applied to Moss about it."

Moorcroft was the name of a house standing in its own grounds, and next to Brooklands, which had long been advertised to let on lease.

"Charley, will that be advisable?" she inadvertently exclaimed.

"Advisable! Why not, Beatrice?"

"Because—because"—she was stammering now—"Miss Ashton may not like Hurstley, you know; it is so retired a place; she may find it dull."

"She has been used to the country all her life," returned Charles Lennox; "and if she had not, my wife must learn to like what I like. I have set my heart on getting Moorcroft, Beatrice. I have always intended, in the event of my marriage, to settle at Hurstley; for, with an establishment of my own to look after, I suppose I shall be compelled in some measure to abandon my dear old visits to Brooklands, and I cannot entirely give up the pleasure of your company. I shall want your head to guide me still, Beatrice."

"You will have another adviser and counsellor now, Charley," she said gently.

He laughed with real amusement at the idea.

"You don't know Louey Ashton, or you wouldn't say that, Beatrice, by Jove! She is a dear little creature, very loving and affectionate, and all that sort of thing; but she's not exactly the sort of woman that a man would go to for advice."

At these words a thrill of pleasure ran through the breast of Mrs. Hilton—pleasure to think that she should still be the first in his esteem, if not in his affection; but the next moment she had rebuked her weakness with a sigh, and returned to the subject which they had in hand.

"But touching Moorcroft, Charley: pray think twice before you take the place. There is no society in Hurstley, remember. Beside the doctor's and the clergyman's wives, who is there fit to be the companion of a young girl reared as Miss Ashton has probably been?"

"There is yourself, Beatrice; and I desire no better companion for Louisa. I am sure you will get on admirably together, although there is little similarity between you. She is a child, of course, compared to you," he said, little recking the pain he inflicted on his hearer; "but a very lovable and companionable child all the same, and with a face to prove a pass-

port through the world. You will be present at the wedding, Beatrice?"

"O, no, no! don't ask me!" with a quick look of anguish unseen by Mr. Lennox. "Remember how seldom I come into society now, Charley."

"Well, that's true," he said, though gravely. "And, after all, I am not sure that I should like you to be there. It will be a very different sort of business to what I have looked forward to; and old remembrances are better left—"

"Are you sure that Moorcroft is not damp?" hurriedly interrupted Mrs. Hilton. "You know that it is in shocking repair."

"Moss has engaged to put all that to rights for me within the given time."

"Still, don't take it without due consideration. I am prepared to like your wife, Charley, and to be a friend to her as I have been to you; but there are two sides to the question, and Miss Ashton may not like *me*."

"By Jove, if she doesn't!" exclaimed Charles Lennox, leaving his intended vengeance, too deep for words, to the imagination.

"But, even supposing that she does," persisted Mrs. Hilton, "I cannot help thinking that you might find a livelier place than Hurstley to reside in, and a livelier companion for your wife than myself."

He looked annoyed and disappointed at her setting her face so determinately against his taking Moorcroft; but in this instance her persuasions were of no avail with him, and he appeared at Brooklands with a bright face a couple of days afterwards to inform her that all preliminary matters were arranged, and the agent had promised that Moorcroft should be in thorough order before he returned from his wedding tour. He looked to herself, he added affectionately, to see the interior of the house arranged as might appear most tasteful in her eyes; and he trusted that when he brought Louisa to the home she had adorned for her, the first sight they should see would be the figure of his dear friend upon the threshold, waiting to welcome them and wish them happiness. So he rattled on in the engrossing selfishness of his new attachment, and his "dear friend" promised all that he desired.

Her first impulse had been to refuse his request, for she felt as though the torture would be more than was required of her; but pride came to her aid, and pushed her weakness out of sight. And since she had been unable to prevent his taking Moorcroft (an event from which her instinct prophesied no increase of pleasure for either of them), she did not wish to refuse any assistance she could give him; and when he had taken his departure, she derived a sad satisfaction in procuring every article of luxury and comfort which

she thought might suit the taste or gratify the fancy of the coming bride.

It was two months before Mr. Lennox again visited Hurstley, and October was fast losing itself in November, as the carriage containing the newly-married couple dashed up to the porch of Moorcroft; and Beatrice, according to her friend's earnest request, came forward from a background of lighted lamps and blazing fires to bid them welcome home. It was an office which she would gladly have avoided, had she not been afraid that Charles Lennox would guess the reason of her refusal; but being there, she determined to be mistress of herself, though her usually pale face was flushed with excitement, and her manner was nervous and unsteady. Mr. Lennox was the first to alight; but he had little occasion to offer his assistance to the lissom figure which jumped out of the carriage after him, and which he had taken by the hand, and led into the drawing-room before Mrs. Hilton had time to reach the hall-door.

"Beatrice, my dear friend," he said, earnestly, as he grasped her hand, "this is real kindness on your part," and then, turning to his wife, he continued: "Now, Mrs. Lennox, off with all these wraps, and prove I deserve a little credit for my choice;" and with playful roughness he unwound the warm shawl in which she was enveloped, and dragged the blushing girl forward beneath the bright lamplight.

She was lovely—enchanting—almost perfect! Mrs. Hilton, sorely as she had tortured herself with imagining the various beauties of Charles Lennox's bride, had never dreamt she could be so fair a thing as this; and as she gazed at her, she heaved a heavy inward sigh, and wondered no more that she herself had been forgotten.

In stature she was middle-sized; in figure, slight but rounded; in complexion, fair and rosy; but all this was nothing to her idealistic face, whence two large blue eyes, surmounting a piquante nose and curved red lips, gleaming out from beneath a nest of golden curls, which, in addition to the fashionable chevelure of the day, lay thickly about her forehead and the nape of her neck. She looked to Beatrice Hilton like some fancy portrait of a lovely girl, so rare and delicate and unearthly was her beauty; and after the first maddening stab of jealousy was past, her feeling was to take the childish figure in her arms, and beg of those wondering star-like eyes to look upon her kindly. And the same impulse seemed to move Louisa Lennox. Her first glance at her husband's friend, of whom she had heard so much, was shy, and almost fearful, as though she expected to be criticised, and perhaps not approved of; but as she met the sad, subdued look of Beatrice Hilton, marked her half-mourning robes, and saw the faint smile which flickered on her mouth, all her timidity vanished; and

withdrawing the hand which she had proffered, she ran up to her instead, and throwing her arms about her neck, laid her innocent lips to hers. Mrs. Hilton was taken by surprise; but all her womanly nature went out to meet that of the young creature who thus threw herself upon her friendship; and with a feeling of interest very different from that with which she had expected to welcome the wife of Charles Lennox, she clasped the girl to her bosom, and warmly returned her embrace.

Mr. Lennox, looking on at the meeting of the two women, already saw, as he imagined, the realization of his dream, and was delighted.

"Come, come!" he exclaimed, "that's right; thank you, Beatrice, ten thousand times. And now will you show my little wife to her own room, that she may prepare for the dinner, which I hope is ready for us?"

Mrs. Hilton did not look at the speaker, but she held out her hand to the fair creature, whom she could scarcely yet regard as his wife, and led her from the apartment.

"I hope you will find everything arranged to your liking," she said, as they entered the bedroom together. "I have done my best; but it is seldom that the tastes of two people entirely agree."

"Oh! I am sure it will all be very nice!" exclaimed the bride, whose voice, with a ring in it expressive of

want of thought or ideas, was not so sweet as her person; "and I am sure it is uncommonly good of you to have taken so much trouble for us; indeed, I told Charley a dozen times that he was very cool to ask it. But you can't think how glad I am, Mrs. Hilton, to find you are not a bit like what I imagined. Charley quite frightened me, talking so much about your goodness and cleverness and sense; and I'm sure I thought, from his description, that you were quite an old woman."

"Did he tell you so?" the other asked, in a voice made tremulous by pain.

"Well, not exactly, perhaps; but he seems to have known you such a long time, and to think so much of all you do and say."

"He has known me during a great deal of sorrow," replied Beatrice Hilton, quietly, "and that ages a woman more than years."

"Ah, yes! your poor little baby and your husband. Charley told me all about them, too; and he says we must try and make up to you for all you have lost—that is to say, as far as our company can go. So that I hope we shall be great friends, Mrs. Hilton, and that you will very often come and dine and sit with us. Will you?"

"I don't know, my dear," said the elder woman, in a voice which rather restrained the other's eager-

ness. "I cannot promise; I have lived now for some time alone, and I do not think I should care to break through my usual solitary habits."

Mentally she had writhed beneath the familiar mention of Mr. Lennox from Louisa's lips, but such pain was as nothing compared to the pang with which she now heard that he had already discussed her past sorrows, and the remedy for them, with his girlish bride.

The remedy! Good heavens! was he going to offer to bind up her broken heart by the society of this child, and the sight of his own devotion to her? He must be made of stone or adamant himself, to fancy such a thing was possible! She could not help it; but Mrs. Lennox's proposition, though kindly made, seemed to close, instead of open, her heart farther to her; and it was in a constrained tone that she suggested that the dinner must be almost ready; upon which they descended together to the dining-room.

"Good-night!" said Beatrice Hilton, with forced gaiety, as she advanced towards Charles Lennox. "I hope the dinner will be to your taste; but you have an excellent cook, and Mrs. Lennox will find she has but to order a thing to have it. Good-night to both of you!"

"You are not going!" he exclaimed, with real concern; "surely you will stay and dine with us!"

"Surely, I will do no such thing, Charley! I am

tired and sleepy; and I want nothing but a cup of tea at home—so, please let me go.”

“O, no! you must not go—you must not, indeed. I quite reckoned on your spending the evening with us. I have a thousand things to say.”

“Then you must say them to your wife, or keep them till to-morrow. I really am not in a fit state for being catechised to-night.”

“Are you in earnest, Beatrice?” he reiterated, with a look of entreaty. “You will greatly disappoint me if you persist in going.”

“O, nonsense!” she replied, with a light laugh; “you can do very well without me, and I am in no mind for anything but bed this evening;” and with a final good-night to the bride, who stood regarding rather ruefully her husband’s look of chagrin, Mrs. Hilton left the room.

She would have liked to stay with him; she, too, had a thousand things to say, which had bubbled up to the surface of her mind at the sight of her old friend; but she felt that she could not say them, she could not trust herself to say them, whilst that golden-haired apparition sat at the other end of the table, and called him “Charley.”

He would have accompanied her home; but she had provided against that contingency, for her carriage was waiting for her at the door; and once within its shelter, she threw herself back upon the dark

cushions and gave way to a flood of bitter tears. She had done her duty; but would it ever become less hard to do it, and could she continue to dwell at Brooklands, with the chance of seeing him, or her, or both of them, each hour of her life?

The next day she determined to spend by herself; and the morning and afternoon passed unmolested; but with the evening shadows in walked Mr. Lennox, eager to know the reason of her absence.

"Why have you not been over to see Louisa, Beatrice?"

"What! has she needed me?"

"Of course she has. Who would not need you? You might have helped her in a hundred ways."

"Did she tell you to say so?"

"No; but I know it. See how young she is."

"True; but she has plenty of experienced servants, who will not give her much trouble in housekeeping. She is best left to herself for the first few days. Have you dined yet?"

Yes, he had dined; but he volunteered to lounge by the fire whilst she took her solitary meal, and talked very much in the old style of all the things which interested them most. It was very delightful to her to see him there and hear him talk, and she had not the courage so early to tell him that he had better go home to his wife and his own fire-side; but she knew that it must not become a habit with him,

and therefore she made an early visit to Moorcroft on the following day, and offered to drive Mrs. Lennox out in her open carriage.

"O, Mrs. Hilton! I wish you had stayed to dinner that first night when Charley asked you," exclaimed the bride, as soon as they found themselves alone (she looked still more lovely by day than by night, Beatrice thought, as she gazed on her peach-like complexion and liquid eyes); "for he was so dreadfully cross after you went; he was so put out about it, that he hardly spoke a word all the evening."

"He was tired," suggested her companion.

"O, no, indeed! he was cross. He says it doesn't feel natural to dine in Hurstley without you."

"Nothing will be more natural to him now than to dine with his wife," replied Mrs. Hilton, kindly.

But Louisa Lennox shook her head.

"I'm not clever, you know, Mrs. Hilton; I never was; and I can't talk sense like clever women. Charley says I was only made to look at."

"That's his nonsense," said Beatrice, as she watched the clouded face beside her. "He said that just to tease you; and you know you don't believe him."

"Oh, but I do! I shall never be a companion for him like you have been, Mrs. Hilton. I'm too young, I suppose, or too foolish. He said so before we had been married a fortnight," and the information was

accompanied by a light laugh, intended to cover the annoyance it had evidently caused.

"Then it was a great shame of him," returned Beatrice Hilton, indignantly.

And she felt indignant about it. Some one had been the means, by this marriage, of causing her a great pang; but it certainly was not this girl, who had married her lover almost in ignorance of the existence of such a person as herself. And at the thought that Louisa's happiness might be sacrificed in the matter as well as her own, all her sympathies were aroused, and she looked with new interest on the fair young face beside her, and resolved that, if need were, she would not shrink from pointing out his duty to Charles Lennox. So when, after the lapse of some weeks, she found that various hints were unavailing, and that he continued to appear at Brooklands whenever she was not at Moorcroft, she summoned up all her courage, and spoke boldly on the subject to him.

"Charley, why are you over here this evening? Louisa must be very lonely by herself."

"I might put a similar question, and say, why are you not at Moorcroft?"

"I do not see the point of that. Besides, I cannot be always at Moorcroft. I have duties at home."

"Well, I don't want to keep you from your duties,

Go on with them as you always used to do, and let me smoke in peace. I'm very happy."

"Yes; but, Charley," said Beatrice, gently, as she halted beside his chair, "you must remember that things are not as they used to be, and that your time is no longer your own to fritter away at Brooklands as you choose."

"My time not my own? I should like to know who the devil's it is, then!"

"It belongs to your wife," she answered, firmly. "Your duty calls you in another direction, and you have no right to spend your evenings here, whilst she sits alone at Moorcroft."

"Oh, she's happy enough! You don't know Louey yet, Beatrice. She's a perfect child, and amused with any nonsense."

"I know quite enough of her to be aware that she must feel your neglect, Charley. But even were it not so, I owe a duty to myself; and I must forbid your coming here in this familiar manner without your wife."

"The deuce!" he exclaimed, with real earnestness. "Do you, Beatrice, condemn me to pass all my evenings at Moorcroft, without a soul to speak to?"

"You have Louisa."

"Pish!"

"It's no use talking in that way. You have married her, and must do what is right by her. At all

events, I will not be the one to sanction your acting otherwise."

"I suppose you're tired of me; got a new friend perhaps, and I am in the way. Is it so, Beatrice?"

The tears rushed to her eyes; but she would not let him see them, and turned away to gather strength before she answered him.

"That was not spoken like yourself, Charley. We have been friends, very close friends, for years, as you well know, and I hope we shall continue so till death. But I should not be your friend if I aided you in doing what I know is wrong. So, once for all, come to Brooklands whenever you like, day or night my house is open to you; but when you come, you must bring Louisa also."

He grumbled for several minutes like a chidden child, and then he suddenly broke out with a fierce oath—

"I wish to Heaven I had never been such a fool! When happiness was within my grasp, to throw it all away for a mere face—a——"

"Charley!"

Her soft hand was laid upon his mouth, her sweet serious eyes gazed steadily into his own. The look and touch quieted him. He turned his head away and spoke no more.

"Go home now, Charley," she said, when her voice was again steady; "go home, and make the best

of what you find there; and the best is very sweet and very lovable, if you will but open your eyes and see it."

But Mr. Lennox did not choose to see it. Exiled, as he termed it, from the place with which he had expected to keep up his old relations, and scarcely ever seeing Beatrice Hilton except in the company of his wife, before whom he elected to believe it was impossible to converse on any rational subject, he became first gloomy, then morose, and finally quitted Moorcroft abruptly to pay a visit to some friends in London, and remained away for more than a month.

During that time Mrs. Hilton saw a great deal of his young wife; and the more she saw the more she liked her. Louisa Lennox was not clever—there was no doubt of that; such extreme beauty as hers is seldom allied to mental power. But though childish and commonplace, she was, what her husband had designated her before their marriage, a "very lovable and companionable child;" and the very manner in which she clung to Beatrice Hilton, and openly confessed her superiority, made the heart of the woman whom she had supplanted warm towards her, as though a daughter had claimed her sympathies. Beatrice Hilton had been terribly jealous of this girl; before she had seen her and Charles Lennox together, she had imagined her beauty and his adoration of it, until she had felt ready to destroy herself for being

so old and plain and grief-stricken as to have lost the power of charming him. But now she could be jealous no longer; and a great compassion for both of them—for her friend who had blighted his happiness, and the young girl whose happiness he was blighting—took the place of that feeling. She had been supplanted by a face, but it was only for a moment; and she saw that the reaction was causing a remorse on her lover's part almost inadequate to his crime. If Beatrice Hilton had been a dishonourable woman, she would have seized such an opportunity for reasserting her claim on Charles Lennox's heart; but she was not. She was all that is most pure and true and womanly; and, far from such a desire arising in her, she grieved more for his disappointment than her own, and resolved to do everything she could to cement the tie which should exist between the husband and his wife. Louisa was very affectionate and confidential with her during the time of Mr. Lennox's absence; but Beatrice could not help perceiving that whilst she regretted her own impotency to establish a claim on her husband's affections, she had evidently a strong suspicion that he had at some time felt more than friendship for the woman to whom she confided it.

"And I can't think, dear Mrs. Hilton," she would conclude, peering wistfully into her companion's face, "if Charley required so much in his wife, why he

didn't tell me of it beforehand, or choose somebody else—somebody like yourself, for instance, who understands all his ways and wishes, and can talk to him on politics, or any of those dry subjects about which I understand nothing.”

“And for not understanding which you are all the more charming, dear child,” Mrs. Hilton would reply, with the blood suffusing her cheeks beneath Louisa's scrutiny. “Politics belong to men; a woman's vocation is to love and to look pretty.”

“But Charley says that is all I can do, and that a doll can do as much,” replied Mrs. Lennox despondently. And then Mrs. Hilton looked down at her perfect features, and thought how she was but another instance of the small power which beauty—by itself and once familiar—retains over men.

But when Charles Lennox returned, matters seemed to grow worse instead of better.

“I wish you would speak to Louisa,” he would come grumbling to Beatrice's side. “The house is all topsy-turvy. The servants do exactly as they please; and it appears to me that she does nothing but smirk at herself in the glass all day long.”

“No, Charley; you must excuse me. Louisa is your wife, and you are not a boy. All that I can do in the way of friendship I will; but to find fault, if it be necessary, is your province, and I cannot consent to accept it from you.”

And then she would be compelled to hear the other side of the question.

"Oh, Mrs. Hilton," Louisa would cry, "do tell Charley how unjust he is towards me. He complains of my not looking after the servants; and when I turned Jane away last week, he had her back again, and said it was my fault much more than hers. How *can* I keep order amongst them, if I am not to be the mistress?"

Of their private quarrels and misunderstandings Beatrice saw little, because she had ceased to enter Moorcroft excepting when invited to do so; but she was constantly made the recipient of complaints from either party, until she almost forgot her own trouble in her desire to keep peace between them.

One evening, as she was sitting in the twilight alone with her sad thoughts (it was early summer then, and the Lennoxes had been married for more than six months), thinking more of her friends than of herself, and grieving for the coolness which had risen up between them, she was startled to see Louisa's figure, robed in white, and with no covering to her head, hurriedly traversing the park which divided their domains. Beatrice Hilton had not met her for some days, for she fancied that her presence at Moorcroft was the invariable signal for fresh dissensions; so she rose quickly to welcome the girl, and ask the reason of her sudden visit; but before she had time

to do so, Mrs. Lennox had flung herself with a loud cry into her arms, and was weeping convulsively upon her bosom.

"Oh, Beatrice, Beatrice!" clinging to her like a frightened child, "keep me with you; don't let me ever go back again! He doesn't love me; he says so. He has loved somebody else all his life—somebody much better and cleverer than myself; and he never, never will care for me again! Oh, my heart will break!"

Mrs. Hilton was shocked as well as alarmed. Was he really so lost to shame as to have permitted it to come to this?

"Louisa—Louisa, my darling," she said, and she pressed the sobbing girl to her and felt she was her darling as she spoke, "you don't know of what you are speaking; it must be a mistake. You and Charley have had words together, and you have altogether mistaken his meaning. He never could have intended you to believe that."

"He did—he did, indeed. He said the only thing worth a rush about me is my face, and he is sick of it. And just now—just now—just now—" with a fresh burst of tears at every repetition of the phrase.

"Louisa, you will make yourself ill if you go on like this. Let me put you to bed, dear. You will

stop this night with me; and everything shall be right again with Charley by to-morrow morning."

"Oh no, no, it can never be!" said the young wife; but even whilst she said it she smiled—such faith had she in the power of her friend to smooth life's way for her.

She was soon in bed, and, exhausted with her emotion, fast asleep; and then Beatrice threw a cloak about her, and crossing the park, appeared like an avenging angel in the presence of Charles Lennox.

"Charles, what is that has happened with Louisa and yourself? I have a right to ask. Do you imagine that I will permit you to make the old relations which subsisted between us a subject of contention and misery for your married life? You should have known me better and respected me more. Shame upon you!"

As she spoke the words, the shame which she invoked seemed indeed to descend upon the man, and Charles Lennox bowed his head and turned away from her.

"Is Louisa with you? What has she been saying?"

"What was as great a pain for me to hear as it should have been for you to tell her. Would you destroy all her happiness—all her faith in you? Would you destroy your child, Charley!"

"My child, Beatrice?"

"Yes, your child; the child that God is about to

send you, to fill up, I trust, the breach in its parents' hearts."

"Is it possible? I had no idea of it. Poor Louey, how much she has had to bear from my revengeful disappointed feelings!"

"But it is over now, Charley; say that it is over! —that you will come to Brooklands with me, and take this poor child in your arms, and assure her of your affection for herself and the little creature that is coming."

"I suppose I must—that I ought to. But, O, Beatrice, you do not know what I have suffered from the consequences of my folly!"

"I know that you have brought them on your own head; and that you have no right to shift any part of the burden upon her. I know that she has an innocent loving heart, which will readily respond to any affection you may show it; I know that she is the mother of your child, and that as you treat her, so will it prove a blessing or a curse to you. Come, Charley! do not delay; a few kind words on your part will have the power to restore her happiness; and the sooner they are said, the more efficacious will they be."

And so she half dragged, half led him back to Brooklands with her; and had the satisfaction to see that the new interest awakened in his breast really gave some zest to his reconciliation with Louisa; whilst the wife, shallow as she was pretty, speedily

forgot all her husband's previous assertions in the assurance of his penitence for them.

But as soon as sunshine was restored and they resettled at Moorcroft, Beatrice Hilton made up her mind to a great sacrifice, which she never could have consummated for any one less dear to her than Charles Lennox. And this was, to leave Brooklands. She had lived in it and loved it for years; there lay the bodies of her husband and her child, and there were clustered her tenderest recollections. Yet she felt that she was a stumbling-block in the way of Charles Lennox's perfect union with his wife; that, as long as she remained in their company, he would always be liable to compare Louisa unfavourably with herself; and that this might end by destroying all their peace of mind for ever. And therefore she resolved that she would be the one to take the initiative, and leave them to themselves, as from the first she felt they ought to have been. She did not tell Mr. Lennox of her resolution, knowing beforehand the arguments with which he would attempt to weaken it; but she stole away from Brooklands on a visit to her relations, and the next thing he heard was that Mrs. Hilton was going abroad, and that the estate was to let for seven or fourteen years.

"You blame me," she wrote in answer to Charles Lennox's reproachful remonstrance on the subject,

“for taking this step without consulting yourself; but forgive me, dear friend, for saying that you are the last person I could have spoken to upon the matter; for I feel you would have attempted to persuade me to act in a manner contrary to what I know to be wisest and most right. Depend upon it, that for Louisa, for you, and for myself, it is best that I should leave Brooklands; and that, when this first pain of separation is over, you will acknowledge the same. You have tried, Charley, to effect *an utter impossibility*—and that is, to make the tender relations which have so long subsisted between us compatible with the higher duties you have taken on yourself. You would have gone on trying to combine the two, until you had made us all miserable; perhaps—God only knows, we are so weak—even criminal. But I leave you with your wife, and entreat you, by the remembrance of our former love, to go hand in hand with me in this undertaking, and not make my sacrifice, which I frankly acknowledge to be such, of no avail. You ask for my future address; but that I cannot tell you. I am fond of travelling; and hope to move about a good deal, and visit many places of which I have no present knowledge but by name. But a letter to my agents will always be forwarded to me as early as possible; and through them I hope often to hear that you and Louisa are well, both in body and mind.” And then, with an earnest heartfelt blessing, the letter

concluded; and Charles Lennox had seen the last of Beatrice Hilton for many, many years.

* * * * *

But not for ever. There came a time when her noble sacrifice of self brought forth fruit with power to heal the trouble of her life. Five years afterwards, we find her in Brussels, gazing out of her apartment windows on the pleasant boulevards, and wondering, as she watches the stream of pedestrians and crowds of vehicles, what part she has in that gay company. Five years had not passed over her, as may well be credited, without leaving some traces of their flight; but lonely and void of sympathy as they had been, they had brought her no fresh trouble, and had proved less harassing than those which she had spent in the company of Charles Lennox and his wife. So that the face of Beatrice Hilton, as it looked thoughtfully out of the window, though not less subdued and quiet than it had been at Hurstley, was far more peaceful and at rest. She had travelled all over the Continent during her term of exile—having visited Italy, Switzerland, Germany, and France; and now, having just returned from a long tour in Holland, she was resting at Brussels, and debating whether she should take a trip to England, before crossing the Pyrenees into Spain, as she intended to do. She wanted to see her own relations: and she very much longed to take a peep at her old friends, now Sir Charles and Lady

Lennox, and the children, of whose advent she had heard with the greatest interest. She thought she might venture to visit them again now; five years was a long interval; mutual ties had sprung up to cement their conjugal affection, and Louisa's letters to herself never breathed anything but a spirit of the most perfect contentment. Besides, she felt a great desire to see "Charley" in his proper position as master of the splendid estate Frapperton Hall, which he had inherited with the title; and, in consequence of moving about, she had received no letters from them, or news from home, for several months past. Indeed, she had but just written to her agents, desiring them to forward her letters at once to Brussels; and as she sat at the window, she was calculating how soon they would arrive, and what a budget of news she should receive from that long interval of silence. A servant entered with a salver: was it possible the *facteur* had arrived? No; it was only a visiting card; but it was past the hour for calling, she could see no one—so she said, as she took the card in her hand; but her mind soon altered as she read the name upon it—"Sir Charles Lennox." Heavens! was it possible he had found her out, and crossed expressly to see her! How kind, how good of him!

Her face flushed scarlet with pleasure and surprise; her hands trembled; her voice shook; she could hardly give the order for his admittance. And when

the servant had descended with her answer, she flew to the first landing, and felt as though he never would accomplish the long flight of stairs which parted them.

“Charley!”

“Beatrice!”

With both hands outstretched, the friends greeted one another, and met with a firm warm clasp, whilst their eyes glowed with affection and delight. There was no recollection at that moment of the weary years which had separated them, nor of the woman who had come between them; but their thoughts leapt backward to the time when they were all in all to one another, and lover met lover on the landing of the staircase. But the glow faded, the transient bliss resolved itself into a calm pleasure; and then Mrs. Hilton led her guest into the sitting-room, and found words wherewith to welcome him.

“Charley, I am so pleased, so very pleased, to see you again. I was only just thinking of England and the dear ones there. But what brings you to Brussels—not to see me, surely?”

“And would that be too great a thing to expect from me,” he answered, gravely, “after all that has passed between us, Beatrice?”

She was vexed to find that, in the first moment of their reunion, he referred to that past which she trusted he had buried; and it was with a slight

shade upon her face that she evaded his question by another—

“How did you leave Louisa and the children—well?”

He turned and gazed at her with open eyes.

“Have you not heard?”

Then she saw he was in mourning, and cried, suddenly:

“Heard! heard what? No—tell me quickly? I have been travelling in Holland, and received no letters for the last six months.”

“And I have been a widower for the same time.”

“O, Charley! never—it *cannot* be true!” There was no tone in her broken voice, no sign in the colour fading from her face, but what betokened a fine and unmixed feeling of womanly compassion for the brevity of a life so surrounded by all that makes life precious. “Charley,” she continued, weeping, “is it really possible? Tell me all about it. Where did it happen, and how?”

“It happened at Frapperton, two days after her confinement; and I lost the child also. I cannot but believe to this day that it might have been prevented.”

“And the little ones that are left! O, how sad, how mournful it seems to me!”

"Ay, poor little mortals! they need a mother's care terribly," he answered, gravely.

There was silence between them for a few minutes, and then she said—

"Did you come to tell me this, Charley?"

"Yes; I have been longing to come and tell it you ever since it occurred, but I could not procure your address. However, the agents sent it to me yesterday, and I started at once. You may fancy how I have needed you, Beatrice."

"Have you? It is a great comfort to know it, though I could have been but of little use."

"You would have been all the use in the world: you would have been *everything* to me, as you always were before my own folly alienated us from one another. Beatrice, you have but just heard this news, therefore it may seem early days to you for me to speak of what lies uppermost in my heart; but remember that I have been living alone for six months without the opportunity of receiving the assurance of either your sympathy or affection. Louisa is gone, therefore I will not tell you now whether I loved her or not; but if I made the last years of her life happy, as I trust I did, it was entirely through your means. You left me, dear Beatrice, with a precious charge, something to fulfil for love of you, and I fulfilled it. Will you never give me anything in return? May I not cherish a hope that some day, not too far in the

future, you will come back with me to Frapperton Hall, and be a mother to my motherless children? Is that an utter impossibility? Don't think of me as I am, dearest; nor yet as I have been—idle, sensuous, and overbearing; but throw back your thoughts, if you can, to those days long past, when we loved and suffered together, and would rather have died together than be wrenched asunder as we were."

"O, Charley! there is no need—there is no need," she answered amidst her tears; "you have always been the first and the dearest in the world to me."

He took her hands in his; he showered kisses on her eyes, her cheeks, her mouth—kisses which she had as little power as inclination to refuse.

"And I have missed all this!" he exclaimed, with strange wonder at his own shortsightedness. "I missed real happiness for years to gratify a passing fancy; though, God knows, the sudden opening of my eyes to what I had passed over was more than punishment for my fatuity. But you have promised, Beatrice, have you not, to bury the past with me, and to begin a new fresh life of love and happiness?"

Yes, she had promised it: her liquid eyes swimming in tears which gave no pain, her bosom gently heaving beneath the fulness of content, her hand which clung to his as if it never would let go,—all spoke in silence more eloquent than words, and

made her lover giddy in the prospect of renewed delight.

Beatrice Hilton had promised to be his, and in due course of time she kept her word.

THE END.

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